

**Specialized Writing**  
**Entertainment and the News**  
**Online Course Requirements**

**Course:** MCOM 3360.01 W

**Credit:** 3 Hours

Online Spring 2018

**Online office hours:** Tuesdays, 3-5 p.m., Thursdays 11 a.m. to noon. or by appointment.

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## **Course Description**

MCOM 3360 Entertainment and the News is an elective course that requires students to analyze, prepare and write solid feature pieces and navigate as responsible and ethical writers through a fast-changing news environment. This course focuses in particular on the ways that entertainment, social media and popular culture influence

the delivery of credible information and prepares students to become responsible members of the discourse community. Emphasis is on developing a level of writing suitable for publication. This course may be repeated as topics vary.

**Prerequisites:** MCOM 1332 with a grade of C or better, 6 hours of English with a grade of C or better and a grade of 80 percent or better in the Pearson Grammar Lab.

## **Course Objectives**

- To learn how to identify good stories and report them in detail, with accuracy, precision and in a highly organized and readable way;
- To understand a reporter's responsibility to handle subjects and sources with respect and care, while always maintaining ethical standards beyond reproach;
- To learn to write solid, well-crafted stories and feature pieces – on deadline;

## **Required Texts**

The Art and Craft of Feature Writing: Based on the Wall Street Journal Guide by William E. Blundell

Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual

Strunk & White, The Elements of Style

A good dictionary and thesaurus

## **Additional Required Materials**

Regular access to a laptop or desktop computer with high-speed Internet capability;

Regular and easy access to your SHSU e-mail and Sam Online;

A good online or hard copy daily planner; and

A good working knowledge of Blackboard.

**Important Notes:** **DO NOT** attempt to take this class on an iphone, ipad, 4G network phone or other handheld device. You will not be able to satisfy the requirements of this class or submit assignments with mobile devices.

In addition, **DO NOT** try to take this class without required textbooks. You will not do well in this class without the required books. I have chosen **INEXPENSIVE** texts that you will need and reference throughout the course of your career - texts that you will keep on your shelves for many years to come - that will serve you well in this class and beyond. These texts are required not for this class alone, but for a lifetime of success in your chosen field of study.

### **Course Requirements**

This course will be heavy on practical experience – that is, we will focus on how to find the story, dig for it and get it reported for publication or broadcast. This means mastering the basics – from interviewing and document research, to dealing with difficult sources to the writing/rewriting and editing of a story. In other words, we will approach this course much like we

would if you were working in a professional newsroom.

You will be expected to keep up with news of the day, and I will be testing you on current events periodically. So read every chance you can the local newspapers, including the *Houstonian*, the *Huntsville Item* and the *Houston Chronicle*. Get in the habit of reading the *New York Times* as much as possible; the Sunday paper would be a good start. The *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* are also important to keep up with. (While reading these stories, study the writers' styles and techniques for producing engaging, informative and often entertaining articles.) Read news on the Internet, watch TV news, local, network and cable. News programs on the radio also can be beneficial. We will also use daily news stories in occasional exercises and for analysis.

This class includes, posted readings, viewing exercises, writing assignments, writing projects, quizzes, exams and vigorous online discussion periods in which I expect all to participate.

*This class is self-driven. That means that your ability to finish the work and do well depends entirely on your efforts to discipline yourself and manage your own time. While this course is arranged to allow you to work at your own pace, it is also designed to "manage" your progress. This means that you must complete each module within a given time frame in order to participate in scheduled online discussions, quizzes and tests. It is therefore extremely important that you keep up with the assignments that are posted and don't fall behind. I would strongly suggest that you schedule and keep an appointment with yourself*

*(or several) each week to work specifically on this class. I strongly encourage you not to "put off" daily assignments until the week of Module deadlines. A good general rule for meeting larger deadlines is to set intermediate deadlines for yourself. If you submit several assignments each and every week, Module deadlines will not pose problems for you. **If you fail to turn in three or more assignments in this class, you will not be able to earn a passing grade.***

**Exams:** Two major exams are scheduled for this class:

**Mid-Term Exam:** The mid-term exam for this class will cover ethics, interviewing and story-writing techniques, grammar and AP style. It will count for 30 percent of your final grade.

**Final Exam:** The final exam will be comprehensive. It will include questions on the writing techniques and practices that we study throughout the semester along with materials from the final two modules. The written portion of the Final Exam will count for 25 points. Section 2 of the Final will be a documentary writing project. Section 2 will count for 75 points. Points from both sections will be combined for your Final Exam grade, and that grade will count for 30 percent of your final grade for this class.

**Daily work:** Do not underestimate the importance of daily assignments in this class. I have worked a number of ungraded assignments into the mix - mostly readings and viewings. Resist the urge to consider these assignments as optional. They are NOT! Think of them as "class time," just as you would in-class time, and take notes, just as if you were in a classroom learning the materials. Every assignment - whether you receive a grade for it or not - is designed to be part of a framework that will ultimately ensure your success in this class. Final projects, papers and exams will be graded based on your ability to master the elements practiced in these individual assignments and to put those techniques to work in your own writing. Daily work will include online discussions, writing assignments, viewing assignments quizzes and writing projects. Daily work will count for 40 percent of your final grade.

**Grading Policy:** I make every effort to grade all daily assignments within 10 days of submission. All late or make-up assignments will be penalized 10 points

unless documented proof of an emergency or a school-sponsored excuse is presented. Contact me as soon as possible if you need permission to submit late or make up an assignment. A maximum of 3 (three) excused make-up or resubmitted assignments will be allowed for each student.

**Extra Credit:** Extra credit assignments are not guaranteed. Should they be offered, they will be offered to all students. (**Tip:** Extra credit assignments, if offered, will be scheduled to coincide with module deadlines, so being on schedule with assignments will allow you a better opportunity to take advantage of extra credit assignments.) Extra credit will **NOT** be offered to individual students to improve a grade or offset missed assignments. Be aware that all extra credit assignments will be graded by the same standards as daily assignments, which means they have the potential to lower your daily grade as well as enhancing it.

**Your Grade:** Grades will be posted in Blackboard. Your final class grade will reflect only the assignments and tests you have already submitted. Your daily grade will reflect only daily assignments and chart your progress on those assignments. If you want to do well in this class, it is worth your time to study frequently (every week) in the Resources Module folder and apply the techniques and information contained there to your daily work. In the event of a borderline grade at the end of the semester, I take attendance and the meeting of deadlines into consideration when issuing final grades.

## **Attendance**

Since we do not meet in a classroom, I do not take “attendance” in this class. However, your presence in this online class is required. If you fail to submit daily assignments on deadline, you will be considered “absent.” Late assignments will be penalized. Three late submissions will cost you approximately one letter grade in this class. If you miss more than three submission deadlines, you will not be able to pass this class. Please do NOT waste my time and yours by asking for a chance to make up missed assignments without WRITTEN proof of an emergency or a school-sanctioned absence (death in the family, illness, school trip, etc.)

## **The Time Frame for this Class**

Most of the elements of this class will remain posted over an extended period of time to allow you to work at your own pace. However, the elements that are time sensitive will need to be completed within the scheduled time frames, and all of the elements for this class will need to be completed by the last class day of the semester (see SHSU academic calendar). Once you advance from one module to the next, you acknowledge that you have completed all the elements from the previous module, and you will be graded on that module accordingly. No late assignments will be accepted from a module after it has closed, and all tests must be taken within scheduled posting times. If you cannot meet the time frame for this class, you must

have an excusable circumstance (such as an extended illness, injury or family emergency). **If you have an emergency or circumstances that prevents you from keeping up with your work in this class, please contact me immediately for counsel and assistance.**

### **Worth remembering**

Don't get behind in this class; we will cover a lot of landscape quickly. Be respectful of your classmates. Pay attention, work hard, mind your manners and don't look for an easy or convenient way to get your work done. If you don't want to work hard to earn a respected place in this profession, you shouldn't be wasting your time and money on this class. Decide now that you are committed to doing your best and giving yourself an education you can be proud of.

A good education is not easy to get. It shouldn't be easy. It should be tough and challenging, otherwise, there's nothing for you to be proud of on the other side. Make a pledge to yourself right now: Your work will be error-free. You will check and double-check, and sometimes, just to be dead-solid-perfect sure, you'll check again. You will never shade a story or angle for the sake of dramatics or tinker



with a quote for convenience and readability. If you take the easy way out or are lazy or sloppy with the facts and your sources, that means you lie, and nobody will hire or promote a liar.

Finally, don't become so enamored with your own prose you can't bear to edit. If you don't edit your own work ruthlessly, if you don't take the time to rewrite to get the phrasing, that word picture, just right, some indelicate editor will, taking unbridled delight in retooling your precious prose. Keep these thoughts in mind and you'll do well. Finally, don't be afraid to ask questions or take a chance. This class is designed to give you room to take creative chances in a safe environment, so don't be afraid to think outside the box and push yourself a little.

## **Academic Honesty**

This institution of learning has a strict policy regarding academic honesty, and I encourage you all to familiarize yourself with it. It is printed below. As for my part, let me say this to you: It is easy in today's environment of ready-made, touch-of-a-button information to confuse what we read, download and write. **Make a real investment in your future this semester by developing the following habit and following it religiously: Every time you download ANYTHING from the Web, highlight it and apply a bright color (red, orange, neon green etc.) to it.**

Then, when you begin to write, do so in black text so that your words and writing will stand apart and not be easily confused with that of others. When you are finished, submit your work through a writing software tool to double check that you have not inadvertently copied someone else's work without credit (Grammarly Or PaperRater are good places to start).

Just for the record: copying someone else's words or ideas, even by accident, is plagiarism, and plagiarism is theft.

If you are lazy or sloppy in your work, you might as well say you don't care whether you steal or not. But others will, and eventually you will be punished for your indifference if you allow it to persist. Better writers than you have lost jobs, careers and influential appointments for nothing more than a few words "borrowed" from another without reference.

Once your record and reputation are marked, it's there for life, and there's nowhere you can go that it will not follow and haunt you. Whether plagiarism is deliberate or just a product of laziness or sloppiness, it is theft, and it is stupid and inexcusable. Don't think you can get away with it in this class. I can see it a mile away, and I will hold you accountable for it.

## **SHSU's Policy**

All students are expected to engage in all academic pursuits in a manner that is above reproach. Students are expected to maintain complete honesty and integrity in their 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.

### **A Few Words on Ethics and Honesty**

The profession into which you are seeking entrance requires that you observe a clear understanding and practice of journalistic ethics. The credible exchange of information is based on this foundation, and any cracks in that foundation endanger everyone who works in the field. You risk your reputation, your credibility and your career if you engage in unethical behavior, and the best way to avoid it is to learn to be absolutely honest. My criterion for academic honesty is as follows:

- Do your own work. This includes daily work as well as tests. If you don't, I will know it, and I will penalize you or issue you a failing grade for this class. This includes "tag-teaming" this class with a friend or classmate.
- We will be looking at a lot of copyrighted materials online this semester. These resources are the product of others' hard work and time. **DO NOT** copy or share online resource materials with anyone not enrolled in this class. This constitutes theft, and you will be subject to disciplinary action if you do so.
- **DO NOT** plagiarize. This means, in essence, that you do not copy anything, from any source, and pass it off as your own work. It also means that you do not use an idea, argument, thought or theory formulated by someone else as your own. It means that if you do reference someone else's work, that you give them full credit for their contribution to your writing. Plagiarism will not only earn you disciplinary action, or a failing grade. It could very well earn you permanent expulsion from this institution.

The following definition of plagiarism – about as clear as you will find for our journalistic purposes, from the home of one of the nation's leading journalism schools – is borrowed from the University of Indiana Student Handbook: Plagiarism is defined as presenting someone else's work, including the work of other students, as one's own. Any ideas or materials taken from another source for either written or oral use must be fully acknowledged, unless the information is common knowledge. What is considered "common knowledge" may differ from course to course.

a) A student must not adopt or reproduce ideas, opinions, theories, formulas, graphics, or pictures of another person without acknowledgment.

b) A student must give credit to the originality of others and acknowledge an indebtedness whenever:

- Directly quoting another person's actual words, whether oral or written;
- Using another person's ideas, opinions, or theories;
- Paraphrasing the words, ideas, opinions, or theories of others, whether oral or written;
- Borrowing facts, statistics, or illustrative material; or
- Offering materials assembled or collected by others in the form of projects or collections without acknowledgment.

Any student in MCOM 3360 who plagiarizes will receive a failing grade on the assignment for the first offense. A second offense will result in a more severe final semester grade penalty, up to and including an F for the course and/or disciplinary referral to the dean.

### **Americans with Disabilities Act**

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 are expected to visit with the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities located in the Counseling Center. 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 a student has a disability that may affect adversely his/her work in this class, then the student is encouraged to register with the SHSU Counseling Center and to talk with the instructor about how best to deal with the situation. All disclosures of disabilities will be kept strictly confidential. NOTE: no accommodation can be made until the student registers with the Counseling Center.

## **Religious Holidays**

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. 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. "Religious holy day" means a holy day observed by a religion whose places of worship are exempt from property taxation under Section 11.20, Tax Code.

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). This request must be made two weeks in advance of when the absence(s) will occur. The instructor will complete a form notifying the student of a reasonable timeframe in which the missed assignments and/or examination are to be completed.

### **Instructor Evaluations**

Near the end of the semester, students will be asked to complete a course/instructor evaluation form. I offer one extra credit grade for participation in the evaluation.

### **Submitted Materials**

Materials submitted by students for this class become the legal property of the instructor and can be used with subsequent classes and published for educational use. The personal privacy of the student will be strictly protected on all materials.

### **Intellectual Property**

All materials used in this course, including examples, assignments, quizzes, exams, graphics and photos,



belong to the instructor of this course. Any exporting, sharing, distributing or downloading of any part of this class without the express permission of the instructor will be considered theft and will be pursued according to legal guidelines.

### **A Note Concerning the Pearson Grammar Lab and AP Module**

Most of you will have taken – and passed – the Pearson Grammar Mastery Assessment by the time you enroll for this class. If you have just transferred into this institution and need to take the quiz, you will have this semester as a “grace period” to get this requirement completed before graduation.

The AP Quiz is located in the AP Module in your list of Blackboard classes. As with the Mastery Test, improvement is the goal. The AP Quiz will count for one daily assignment in this class. It will remain open until 24 hours before the last day of the semester, and your highest score for the semester will prevail. In order to improve previous scores, study the AP worksheets in the AP module. Students who earn a 95 or better on the AP Quiz also will receive extra points on their final grades for this class. Be aware that both the Mid-term and Final Exams are weighted heavily with AP Style questions and can make a difference of

up to 10 points (one letter grade) on your final test scores.

The AP Quiz can be taken up to three times this semester. You may do this in your own time, but I encourage an early start, as grading throughout the semester will reflect your growing mastery of these rules. Nothing you will study in this department is more important to your long-term success than the ability to write clean, efficient, concise and compelling prose. Your advanced literacy is the most important concern you can address, and in this class I expect you to take that goal seriously and work hard to improve your skills. You should be working every semester to improve your score on the quiz.

***Note:** If you have already earned a 95 or better on the AP Quiz, submit an official screenshot to me of your score(s), and I will apply your extra credit points at the end of the semester.*

## **Acceptance of Class Requirements**

Copy and e-mail the following verification to me at [jrn\\_cje@shsu.edu](mailto:jrn_cje@shsu.edu).

Provide your signature (name) and SHSU I.D. to ensure proper access to this class. (Your signature below verifies that you have read this document, understand the requirements for this class and agree to bear all penalties for failing to meet those requirements.)

I hereby confirm that I have read the Online Class Requirements document for MCOM 3360W - Specialized Writing and understand all of the terms and conditions presented therein. I further guarantee that the signature provided below is my own and does not belong to anyone serving as proxy for me or acting in my stead, that I am registered for and/or approved to take this class and that I am a registered student at Sam Houston State University.

Online Signature \_\_\_\_\_

SHSU I.D. \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_