FEATURE WRITING
(CMST 360-1F)
Fall 2013
MWF 1:25 - 2:15 p.m.
HHB 342
Instructor: Dr. Ibelema
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Office Hrs: MW 2:30-4; T 4-5

REQUIRED TEXTS
1. Professional Feature Writing (5th Ed.) by Bruce Garrison.
2. The Associated Press Stylebook

RECOMMENDED TEXTS
1. Any introductory newswriting textbook.
2. Any grammar handbook.

COURSE OVERVIEW
This course deals with the techniques of writing human-interest and other “soft” stories. You will be expected to develop competence in writing color pieces, profiles, narratives, and trend features primarily for newspapers, but also for magazines. The course is as much about feature reporting as it is about feature writing. In other words, the ability to gather and select relevant information is as important as the skill of crafting interesting articles out of the information.

SOME SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES
1. To understand the difference between writing features and hard news.
2. To understand the special requirements of different types of features.
3. To improve on techniques of information gathering, especially observing and interviewing.
4. To develop a keener appreciation of the aesthetics of journalistic writing.
5. To become familiar with the process of and markets for free-lancing.

STRATEGY FOR LEARNING
The only way to learn how to write is to read and write. We will be doing a lot of both, in and out of class. We will take a literature approach to this course. That is, substantial class time will be devoted to critiquing feature stories written by professionals. You are expected to be an active participant in the discussion. Be prepared to have your work critiqued by your peers. An editor once said that the difference between writing for a course and writing for a publication is that only in the latter case does the writer have to grapple with public reaction. We will try to minimize that difference by having the class be each student's audience.

The assignments described below and others that will be given in class are intended to give you as much opportunity as possible to attain the objectives outlined above. You are encouraged to go beyond the requirements to develop a deeper familiarity with the techniques and processes of feature writing. You should, for instance, examine several feature magazines to become familiar with the finer aspects of their content and style. You should also make it a habit to read newspapers and magazines not merely as a reader, but as a writer. That is, you should learn not only to appreciate (or not appreciate) what you read, but also to understand why. You should discern a magazine's assumptions about its readers and the writer's reason for a particular approach. Such understanding is essential to your development as a writer.

ASSIGNMENTS AND EVALUATIONS
You will be evaluated on a variety of assignments worth a total of 300-320 points, as follows:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Points</th>
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<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous exercises</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feature article review</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Query Letter</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Two responses to queries</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Publications (at least two)</td>
<td>20-40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feature copies (3)</td>
<td>150</td>
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**Miscellaneous exercises:** You will be assigned a variety of exercises, including writing critiques of exemplary feature articles selected by the instructor. The length of critiques will be announced when assigned. Some in-class exercises will be collected and graded in the usual way; others will be discussed and points will be awarded to all who completed the assignment and participated in the discussion. There is usually one make-up opportunity and the exercise has to be done before other students' papers are returned.

**Feature article review:** You are to briefly critique one feature article you choose as exemplary of the art and discuss it in class. A 150-word typewritten critique highlighting important techniques in the article should be submitted along with the article on the day of presentation. Critiques have to go beyond generalities. It is not enough, for instance, to write that you like the article. You have to briefly explain the feature writing techniques used and why they are effective in that article. You are encouraged to make copies of the article or parts for the class or to display it by projection. The reports must be made on Monday or Wednesday by the following schedule, based on the first letter of your last name: A & B: Week 3; C & D: Week 4; E & F: Week 5; G & H: Week 6; I & J: Week 7; K & L: Week 8; M & N: Week 9; O & P: Week 10; Q & R: Week 11; S & T: Week 12; U, V & W: Week 13; X, Y & Z: Week 15. You are encouraged to complete this assignment ahead of schedule. The deadlines are strictly enforced.

**Query letter:** The query letter is an important step in freelancing. You are required to compose and submit a query letter, preferably on a topic you will write as a feature assignment. The query should be addressed to a regional or national magazine that accepts free-lance articles. See due date in the course schedule.

**Query responses:** You are required to submit queries to several regional and national magazines early in the semester to allow enough time for their responses. You should submit two of the responses to the instructor for credit no later than the last day the class meets, not including the final exam.

**Publications:** You are required to earn at least 20 points by publishing two articles in a campus or professional newspaper or magazine. You may earn up to 20 additional points by publishing two additional feature stories. If you publish a feature story in a major regional or national magazine, you will earn 40 points (the maximum for this assignment).

**Feature Copies:** You will write three out-of-class features: a color/human interest piece, a personality profile, and a trend feature. The specific requirements for each story will be discussed. Here are the general requirements and guidelines:

1. **Acceptable topics:** Story ideas have to be “soft” or of high "human interest." You may not write about family members or use them as sources. To make sure your idea/approach meets the criteria, discuss it with the instructor in advance.

2. **Angle/target audience:** Stories have to be local in angle and based on interviews you conducted. However, when applicable, you should also provide a national context by getting facts from publications or the Web (provided they are appropriately attributed). You may write a non-local story only if commissioned or requested by a publication. (The pertinent document has to be attached to the paper.) All other stories have to be targeted for publication in a Birmingham-area newspaper or magazine. *You should indicate a target publication on all copies.*

3. **Length:** Copies 1 & 2 should be about 600 words long (2 double-spaced typewritten pages in 12-pt, Times New Roman font); Copy 3 should be about 750 words long (2 1/2 pages).

4. **Creativity and style:** Be creative within the bounds of facts. A feature story should do more than inform. It should tug at the heart (or fascinate the reader) and engage the imagination.

5. **Facticity and originality:** Features, like news, have to be factual and accurate. Plagiarism and fabrication are major academic and professional violations.
6. **Contact sheet**: A list of everyone quoted (directly or indirectly) in a story should be attached to the back of the copy, along with phone numbers. Anonymity is rarely ever acceptable and has to be cleared in advance by the instructor.
Evaluation criteria: Your copies will be evaluated by the following criteria:

- Overall professionalism (whether the article is publishable in a professional paper).
- Scope of reporting (whether the article shows resourcefulness in gathering information).
- Organization (whether the article is well structured).
- Style (whether the article reflects the form and flair for its genre and target publication).
- Grammar (including spelling and punctuation).
- Timely submission (whether the copy is submitted — typed — when due).

COURSE SCHEDULE*

Week 1 (8/26, 8/28, 8/30)
Syllabus review. Beyond the five W's: a bit of history: What is a feature story?
Readings: Ch. 1, 2

Week 2 (9/4, 9/6) (LABOR DAY MONDAY; NO CLASSES)
Feature like fiction: leads, developments, endings.
Readings: Ch. 5

Week 3 (9/9, 9/11, 9/13)
Feature leads: more discussion, exercises.

Week 4 (9/16, 9/18, 9/20)
Finding article ideas and researching; marketing articles: queries and article memos.
Readings: Ch. 3, 4, 18

Week 5 (9/23, 9/25, 9/27)
Descriptive writing: appealing to the senses, literary devices, humor.
Readings: Ch. 6, 15
Due Friday: Query letter

Week 6 (9/30, 10/2, 10/4)
Descriptive writing exercise.

Week 7 (10/7, 10/9, 10/11)
Human interest features; developing one’s style; campus angles.
Readings: Ch. 7

Week 8 (10/14, 10/16, 10/18)
Human-interest interviews and the personality profile.
Readings: PP. 78-84; Ch. 7
Due Friday: Color/human interest feature (Copy I)

Week 9 (10/21, 10/23, 10/25)
Profiles: more discussion, exercise.

Week 10 (10/28, 10/30, 11/1)
First-person narratives, travel pieces; use of dialogues; flashbacks; exercise
Readings: Ch. 12, 14

Week 11 (11/4, 11/6, 11/8)
Trend features and thinkpieces, making figures come alive.
Readings: Ch. 9, 11, 16

Week 12 (11/11, 11/13, 11/15)
Trends (cont’d): Health and science.
Due (Thursday): Personality profile (Copy 2)
Week 13 (11/18, 11/20, 11/22)
Conferences (individuals sign up)


Week 15 (12/2, 12/4, 12/6)
Writing reviews: movies, music, food.
Reading: Ch. 9, 12

FINAL EXAM: Friday, Dec. 13, 10:45 a.m: Trend story (copy 3) due.

*The instructor may make changes to this schedule when necessary to meet the objectives of the course.

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