

ENGLISH 89 — JOURNALISM AND STORYTELLING

CALTECH — SPRING 2016

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“...All of us [journalists] share one frequently neglected responsibility: We’re supposed to be tellers of tales as well as purveyors of fact. when we don’t live up to that responsibility we don’t get read.”

“We’re modern, well educated, computerized — and still no different from those men who wandered from one rude village to another in ancient Greece, enchanting people with tales of an Odysseus driven by storm and the gods’ caprice across Homer’s wine-dark sea.”

— William E. Blundell: The Art and Craft of Feature Writing

“Journalism” — What is it, exactly? What is its form and what is its function, its purpose? Has its role changed in the 21st Century? Is it diminished? We’ll examine these questions (journalism, after all, is about asking questions) and other topics, such as fairness, bias, balance and objectivity.

But most of all, we’ll learn how to write stories using the tools of journalism. We’ll look at what makes a story, well, a story. We’ll examine what makes a tale compelling, a “must-read.” We’ll learn how to shape a feature piece, and how to gather material for different kinds of in-depth stories.

We’ll look closely at interview techniques, who are good sources and how to cultivate them, and the critical importance of accuracy and ways to ensure it. We’ll work on the right way to organize a story, using advice from talented journalists who will visit the class.

Along the way, we’ll spend substantial time examining numerous examples of strong journalistic storytelling in magazines and newspapers.

You’ll also read the same books, using them to examine various style and reporting and writing techniques.

The books for this class are:

**And Still We Rise, by Miles Corwin; and
The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace, by Jeff Hobbs.**

Plus, for each class you’ll be expected to read critically the front section of TUESDAY’s Los Angeles Times — the print version — and to bring the paper to class. The paper is a roadmap of the form and content of journalism. Be prepared to mark it up — its headlines, its story choice and placement, the story content. On occasion, class members will be expected to lead the discussion about the paper.

There will likely be at least one field trip.

This is an interactive course where you will think, discuss, question and probe.

And, you will **WRITE**.

GRADING — No one should get less than a B in this course if they a) come to class; b) participate in class discussions; c) turn in the assignments; and d) show evidence of effort — and improvement.

GRADES — Simple:

Midterm — 25% — this will be an assigned paper.

Final — 25% — another assigned paper.

Homework written assignments — 25%

class participation — 25%

ALL ASSIGNMENTS SHOULD BE **EMAILED TO rekipling@gmail.com**. Send as attachments that are compatible with WORD format, or as email text.

ASSIGNMENTS ARE ALWAYS DUE ON **SUNDAYS by 6PM UNLESS OTHERWISE SPECIFIED**.

LATE HOMEWORK — We'll operate like a newspaper. Miss the deadline, the story gets spiked/killed/not published. Only the most inventive excuses will allow for late work, and in every case it will cost 10% (out of a possible 100%), or one grade. If more than ONE DAY LATE, each day will cost another 10%. Example: turn the assignment in by 6pm Monday, it's minus 10%; after that and by 6pm Tuesday and it's minus 20%, and so on.

COMMUNICATION — Feel free to email me with concerns: again, rekipling@gmail.com

WHAT IS EXPECTED OF YOU —

++ Attendance. We'll be going over substantive material each class, and there will be frequent in-class work.

++ Reading the paper — at least on class day — is important. Points about journalism will come out of our examination of the newspaper.

++ Class discussion. It is the engine of the class. Other courses may have a different format — lectures and note-taking, for example. Your learning in this class depends on strong participation and engagement. My perception of what you have contributed to class discussion will play a role in your final grade.

++ Dedication to improving your skills. Self-explanatory...

++ Full attention. Electronic devices other than laptop computers are to be turned off during class.

++ If you have a laptop, bring it to each session. We will frequently do exercises in class.

If you pay attention, do the work and think analytically about what's being presented, you will leave this class a much stronger, clearer writer than when you arrived. That's a promise I know I

can keep. You will also evidence a greater understanding and, I hope, appreciation of the dedication and skill that top-level journalism requires.

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