

COM 425: Feature Writing

Spring 2011/MWF 11–11:50 a.m./Rowland 206

Prof. Stephanie A. Witmer

Office Hours: MWF noon–2 p.m. or by appt. / Office: Rowland Hall 126

E-mail: SAWitmer@ship.edu / Office Phone: 717.477.1525

Required Materials:

- *Feature Writing: The Pursuit of Excellence*, by Edward Jay Friedlander & John Lee, 7th edition, 2011.
- *Feature & Magazine Writing*, by David E. Sumner & Holly G. Miller, 2nd edition, 2009.
- *Associated Press (AP) Stylebook* (latest edition)
- *Webster's New World Dictionary* (pocket-sized, latest edition)

Plus:

- Reliable Internet access.
 - Portable flash drive, manila folders, notepads, and a digital voice recorder (or voice recorder app for a smart phone).
 - Students will be also required to purchase magazines a few times during the semester.
-

Course Description: This course focuses on specialized writing for magazines. It also offers instruction and practice in the type of research essential to the writing and publication of feature articles. The primary goal of the course is to teach students how to write and sell professional-quality feature stories in hopes of publishing them.

COM 425 is a 400-level, advanced writing course. *Very strong journalistic-writing skills are necessary.* This course does not teach the basics of news writing or reporting; you should already have experience or taken a class that has taught introductory journalistic writing. All students must have successfully completed COM 112 (Media Writing) before taking this course, but students who have also taken News Writing & Reporting or who have written for *The Slate* or other outlets will be at a distinct advantage in the course.

COM 425 requires excellent writing and editing skills, and knowledge of AP style. A strong work ethic, lots of ideas, curiosity and creativity are also vital to your success in this course. Good feature writers must be persistent, motivated, creative and perpetually curious. The best feature-writers love to read (and read A LOT), write, travel, find answers to questions, and learn and try new things. They're open to new experiences, are outgoing and willing to pursue a story. If you don't like to read, write, investigate, and talk to people, this is not the course for you!

Learning Objectives: Students who successfully complete this course will:

- Learn the principles and practices of feature writing.
 - Read and analyze examples of feature stories from the masters of the craft.
 - Understand differences between feature stories and other journalistic writing.
 - Develop strong news judgment.
 - Develop story ideas, engage in research and conduct interviews.
 - Write and revise four magazine-style feature stories.
 - Publish at least one story.
 - Participate in peer reviews of their work and offer feedback on their classmates' work.
 - Practice accurate and ethical reporting and writing.
 - Better understand writing under deadlines.
-

PROFESSIONAL VALUES & COMPETENCIES FOR C/J MAJORS AND MINORS:

The Communication/Journalism Department faculty sets the goal of developing within each student the following core professional values and competencies as defined by the Accrediting Council for

Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC): *[competencies addressed in this course are in bold]*

- 1. Understand and apply First Amendment principles and the law appropriate to professional practice.**
2. Demonstrate an understanding of the history and role of professionals and institutions in shaping communications.
- 3. Demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of groups in a global society in relationship to communications.**
- 4. Work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity.**
- 5. Think critically, creatively and independently.**
- 6. Conduct research and gather information by methods appropriate to the communications professions in which they work.**
- 7. Write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communications professions, audiences and purposes they serve.**
- 8. Critically evaluate their own work and that of others for grammatical correctness, appropriate style, clarity, accuracy and fairness.**
- 9. Understand concepts and apply theories in the use and presentation of images and information.**
10. Apply basic numerical and statistical concepts.
- 11. Apply tools and technologies appropriate for the communications professions in which they work.**

American Disabilities Act (ADA) Statement: Students with disabilities are not required by law to identify themselves to Shippensburg University and the Office of Disability Services. However, if a student desires accommodations, the student is obligated to complete the necessary forms and provide disability documentation at the time other requests are made. It is the policy of Shippensburg University to accommodate students with disabilities, pursuant to federal law, state law, and the University's commitment to equal education opportunities. Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact the Office of Disability Services, which is located in 120 Horton Hall, or via phone at 717.477.1329.

Learning Center Resources: If you feel you need extra help to improve your academic performance in this course or any of your other courses, please consider making an appointment with a tutor or learning specialist in the Learning Center (LC). The LC is located on the lower level of Lehman Library, right below Starbucks, and can also be reached at 717.477.1420. *If you're struggling with any portion of the course, please let me know ASAP so that we can work together to improve your understanding and performance.*

COURSE POLICIES:

Attendance & Participation: Treat this class as you would a job—be on time every day, and be prepared to work and participate. Students are expected to attend class and to be on time. Tardiness will not be tolerated. Once the classroom door closes, it stays closed; if you're late, you're out of luck and will be marked absent for the day, unless you let your instructor know ahead of time. Students are permitted **two** unexcused absences for the semester. Twenty (20) points will be deducted from the student's overall course grade for **each** additional absence after two.

Contact the Dean's Office immediately if you must miss class because of a family emergency or an extended illness. Absences will only be excused with notification from the Dean's Office, a doctor's note, a note from an athletic coach, or other official documentation.

Students must attend each class with all necessary materials in hand and all homework and reading assignments completed. (Please bring your textbook, AP stylebook, and flash drive—which contains the most updated versions of your stories and notes—to class with you each day.) In-class assignments cannot be made up and will receive zero points if your absence is unexcused. Late work

will not be accepted for unexcused absences. When you miss class, it is your responsibility to turn your work in on time and to find out what you missed. If you're going to miss class, please post assignments to the dropbox on D2L by class time.

Class participation is also required of each student. Students will regularly be asked to share your work in class and should be prepared to do so. Students are expected to have completed all reading and all other assignments by class time and be prepared to discuss them. Students will earn 5 points per class for attending and participating and 0 points for not attending or not participating.

Classroom Etiquette: Texting and other cell-phone use is strictly prohibited in the classroom. Turn your phone off upon entering the classroom and store it in your backpack or bag for the duration of the class period. Food and drinks are not permitted in the computer labs. Personal computer use is permitted in the minutes before class begins, but you should log off the computer once class starts, unless instructed otherwise. Students should not be checking e-mail, Facebook or other websites during class. Likewise, all homework assignments must be printed before class begins. All of this is common courtesy and professionalism, and students who cannot abide by these rules will be asked to leave the classroom and will be marked absent for the day.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Feature Stories: You will write four original feature stories this semester:

- (1) "one-pager" (750–800 words) = 100 points
- (2) service/how-to story (1,000–1,200 words) = 100 points
- (3) profile (1,800–2,000 words) = 200 points
- (4) issue/trend story (2,000–2,500 words) = 300 points

Publication Requirement: Students are required to publish **at least one article** during the semester. Articles may be published in The Slate, in a local newspaper or on a legitimate news website (as the instructor deems appropriate). Journalists get jobs based on their "clips"—their published work—and their experience, and this course aims to help you in both of those departments. (Likewise, students in the major need pieces for their portfolios in order to graduate and to have experience in student media to qualify for an internship.) *Students who do not meet the minimum publication requirement will have their final grades lowered by one half grade. Students who publish more than one story will have their final grade increased by one half grade.*

Readings & Analyses: We will learn about the craft of feature writing and read examples from the masters of the form. Students should always come to class prepared to thoroughly discuss the assigned readings and practice "active reading" by highlighting, taking notes, and jotting down questions or thoughts to prepare for our discussions. There will be occasional activities revolving around the readings, including written analyses of stories. Bring stories with you to class on discussion days so you can easily reference them. Each analysis should analyze the writer's main points and writing techniques, not merely summarize the story. Each story analysis should be 2–3 pages in length and is worth 25 points.

Magazine analyses require students to purchase or borrow from the library print copies of an assigned publication. Students will perform in-depth analyses of these magazines' print and online versions, including the editorial content, design, tone/voice, audience and advertising. (Try to find back issues, as well, for a more informed analysis.) You'll present what you found to the class the day the analysis is due. Each analysis should be 2–3 pages in length and is worth 25 points. Students will analyze five different magazines throughout the semester.

Discussion Board: Although we will discuss readings at length during class, you will sometimes be asked to post to the class discussion board on D2L on the days our class "meets" online. Participation on the discussion board when assigned is required. There will also be an open "ideas" forum, where students can ask for suggestions or help and share ideas for stories. Please check the discussion board a few times a week. Participation on the "ideas" forum counts as extra credit (1 point per post, applied to the overall course grade.)

In-Class Writing & Revising: As this is a writing class, we will be doing lots of writing exercises intended to stoke ideas and creativity, as well as working on drafts and revisions of stories. Every student should carry an updated copy of the piece he/she is working on a flash drive, in your e-mail, or in your personal file space at all times.

Story Files: All work for this course must be original and accurate. All journalists make files for their stories, and sometimes editors ask to see these files for fact-checking or legal purposes. You'll turn in a complete story file in a manila folder with every feature story you write for this course. All files will be returned to you with your graded stories. *Failure to turn in your notes will result in an automatic F for the assignment. Story files that are incomplete will lower your grade significantly.* Story files should include the following material, from front to back, in your folder:

1. Final draft of story
2. All rough drafts & comments from peer reviews
3. Fact-checked copy of story (when required; marked "FC" on first page)
4. List of sources & their contact information
5. All interview notes & transcripts
6. All research material

ASSIGNMENT REQUIREMENTS:

Editing, Accuracy & Rewrites: Accuracy is the cornerstone of journalism, and will be taken very seriously in this class. Students should edit their work very carefully and ask others (classmates, friends, etc.) to read their copy before turning it in. Points will be deducted for errors (spelling, grammar, AP style, typos, biased language, etc.). *If more than 10 grammatical, spelling or style errors are found, the story will be returned to the student for rewriting.* Students will have only one opportunity to rewrite a story—after that, the story will receive an F. All rewrites are due by the next class period.

It is imperative that professional writers turn in flawless drafts to their editors. If you turn in work that's full of errors, you lose credibility and won't get hired again. If grammar and mechanics are especially difficult for you, please visit Learning Center for extra help. Be sure to consult your AP Stylebook to make sure all abbreviations, ages, dates, punctuation, etc., are correct. If your story contains a major fact error, such as flawed or incorrect information (e.g., misspelling someone's name, misquoting them, etc.), you will receive an automatic F for the story. Most stories must be fact-checked before they are turned in.

Ethics & Academic Dishonesty: Accuracy is the cornerstone of any type of journalism. Plagiarizing or making up facts, large or small, results in the loss of both credibility and employment in the real world, and will result in an *automatic F for the course*. All instances of academic dishonesty will also be reported to the Director of Judicial Affairs and Dean of Students Office, after which other penalties may be applied. All quotes, observation and research information must be properly attributed and must be included in your notes for the story. If this material is missing from the story file, I can only assume it was fabricated. I cannot stress enough how seriously this issue is taken. It is your responsibility as the writer to make sure your stories are factual, accurate and original.

Deadlines & Late Work: Deadlines are not negotiable, nor are they mere suggestions. There is no excuse for late work. *Late or missed work will not be accepted, and will automatically receive a 0.* This class will be time-consuming, so plan accordingly. **DO NOT PROCRASTINATE.** All work must be printed and ready to turn in at the beginning of class, not being printed in the lab as class starts, or else it will be considered late. E-mailed work will not be accepted without prior permission from the instructor.

Professionalism & Courtesy: Writers are indebted to their sources for providing them with valuable information needed to complete their stories—and to their editors for providing them with work. They are doing you a favor, not the other way around. You must meet with interview subjects at the time and place that is most convenient to them, not to you. This means that you may need to do

interviews in the evenings, early in the morning, or on the weekends. That is the life of a journalist—do what you need to do to get your story without complaint. You must correspond with sources and editors professionally—no slang or unprofessional language in e-mails, for instance. There is no excuse for showing up to an interview late or ill prepared, or for being rude to a subject. There is no excuse for missing a deadline. *If I receive reports of any bad behavior from a source or an editor, you will automatically receive an F for the assignment.*

Manuscript Format: All work must be **typed** and printed on standard white paper in black ink. Handwritten work will not be accepted and will receive a zero (0) for the assignment. All work should be **double spaced** to allow for ease of reading and editing. Homework is due at the start of class or by the end of the period for an in-class assignment. Late work will not be accepted and will receive a zero (0).

Please include the following **heading** on each assignment, typed in the top left corner of the first page (no separate title pages, please):

Student's Name Student's E-mail Address Date Slug Word Count Title

GRADING & EVALUATION:

As COM 425 is a writing course, students should be prepared to write — a lot. The four feature stories students will write during the semester — a “one-pager,” a service/how-to story, a profile, and an issue/trend story — will make up the bulk of the grade for the course, but points will also be given for in-class activities and assignments, occasional analyses of readings and magazines, as well as attendance/participation.

In order to give credit to students’ improvement over the course of the semester, students will be permitted to revise some of their assignments to be re-evaluated for a possible higher grade — though it should be noted that revision is an important component of all writing. Students should edit their work carefully and ask others, such as classmates, roommates or friends, to read their copy before it is turned in.

Mechanical errors, including spelling, grammar, AP style, typos, and biased language will result in a deduction of points on an assignment. A deduction of **0.25** will be deducted for each grammar or spelling error. Students are permitted three AP style errors, but after that, **0.25** will be deducted for each additional error. Accuracy is a key element of journalism because people rely on the media to provide them with complete and accurate information to help them with their decision-making. A major fact error in a story, such as flawed or incorrect information, including misspelling someone’s name, giving a source a wrong title, or misquoting a source, will result in a grade of zero (0) for the assignment.

Explanation of Assignment Grades:

A/A- — This is work that is publishable or usable as is. It has no errors. It shows a superior command of facts, news judgment, organization, and writing. News judgment includes an engaging lead and selection of newsworthy facts and quotes. Organization includes items such as transitions, readability and following the inverted-pyramid style when appropriate.

B+/B/B- — Could be published with some revision. The assignment reflects good news judgment, organization and writing but contains some minor errors.

C+/C — An average job. Not a story or press release that someone would stop and read unless he or she really needs the information. The piece has some basic organizational or writing problems.

D — A poor piece. It lacks fundamental judgmental and or writing skills. May have a fact error or major spelling or grammatical errors. Omission of two or more important facts or elements (story is not complete). Contains major problems in organization and language usage. Fails to meet basic writing standards. Needs substantial editing, rewriting and reorganization.

F — Unacceptable work. The piece has too many fundamental writing problems to be readable, is incomplete, does not follow directions, or fails to meet the deadline. It may also include a major fact error, such as the misspelling of a person's name, a misquote or unattributed material or quotes.

Feature Stories = 700 points

Homework = 250 points

Attendance/Participation = 170 points (5 points per class)

SEMESTER SCHEDULE *(subject to — and most likely will — change)*

WEEK/DATE	TOPIC/IN CLASS	ASSIGNMENT DUE
Week 1 Wed 1/19	Introduction to the course	
Fri 1/21	What Are Feature Stories?; Developing Story Ideas; assign Story #1	Read Preface, Ch. 1 & Ch. 2 (Sumner)

Week 2 Mon 1/24	The Short Feature Story; assign Magazine Analysis #1	Read Ch. 13 & Ch. 3 (Sumner); read Ch. 3 (Friedlander)
Wed 1/26	Strong Ideas, Strong Research	Read Ch. 4 (Sumner); read Ch. 4 (Friedlander)
Fri 1/28	Topic #1	<i>Topic #1 Due</i>
Week 3 Mon 1/31	Interviewing	Read Ch. 5 (Sumner); read Ch. 5 (Friedlander)
Wed 2/2	Interviewing	Continue Ch. 5 (Sumner) & Ch. 5 (Friedlander)
Fri 2/4	Interviewing	<i>Magazine Analysis #1 Due</i>
Week 4 Mon 2/7	Hooks, Intros & Leads	Read Ch. 8 (Sumner); read Ch. 6 (Friedlander)
Wed 2/9	Hooks, Intros & Leads	Continue Ch. 8 (Sumner) & Ch. 6 (Friedlander)
Fri 2/11	Hooks, Intros & Leads	<i>Story #1 Due</i>
Week 5 Mon 2/14	Writing Service & How-to Stories	Read Ch. 16 (Sumner); <i>Topic #2 Due</i>
Wed 2/16	Writing Service & How-to Stories	Read sample service stories (on D2L)
Fri 2/18	Writing Service & How-to Stories	ONLINE CLASS: read & discuss sample stories; <i>Magazine</i>
Fri 2/18	Writing Service & How-to Stories	ONLINE CLASS: read & discuss sample stories; <i>Magazine Analysis #2 due</i>

Week 6 Mon 2/21	Timeliness, Currency & Usefulness	Read Ch. 17 (Sumner)
Wed 2/23	Timeliness, Currency & Usefulness	Continue Ch. 17 (Sumner)
Fri 2/25	Timeliness, Currency & Usefulness	Read sample stories (on D2L)
Week 7 Mon 2/28	In-class writing day	Bring all notes, drafts for in-class writing; <i>rough drafts due by end of class</i>
Wed 3/2	Peer Review	<i>Peer review of Story #2; Topic #3 Due</i>
Fri 3/4	Story #2 Due	ONLINE CLASS: Story #2 due by noon (drop off at Prof. Witmer's office); online assignment TBA
Week 8 Mon 3/7	SPRING BREAK	SPRING BREAK
Wed 3/9	SPRING BREAK	SPRING BREAK
Fri 3/11	SPRING BREAK	SPRING BREAK
Week 9 Mon 3/14	Writing Profiles	Read Ch. 14 (Sumner); read Orlean's "The American Man, Age 10" (on D2L)
Wed 3/16	Writing Profiles	Continue Ch. 14 (Sumner); read Junod's "Can You Say ... Hero?" (on D2L); <i>Magazine Analysis #3 due</i>
Fri 3/18	Writing Profiles	Read Junod's "Michael Stipe Has Great Hair" & Hiatt's "Jimmy Fallon's Big Adventure" (on D2L)
Week 10 Mon 3/21	Action & Anecdotes	Read Ch. 9, 10 & 11 (Sumner)
Wed 3/23	Action & Anecdotes	Continue Ch. 9, 10 & 11 (Sumner)
Fri 3/25	Action & Anecdotes	Continue Ch. 9, 10 & 11 (Sumner); <i>Topic #4 due</i>
Week 11 Mon 3/28	Editing & Revising	Read Ch. 12 & 22 (Sumner); read Ch. 9 (Friedlander)
Wed 3/30	Editing & Revising	Continue Ch. 12 & 22 (Sumner) & Ch. 9 (Friedlander); <i>Magazine Analysis #4 due</i>
Fri 4/1	Editing & Revising	ONLINE CLASS: Assignment TBA; submit rough drafts to dropbox by noon
Week 12 Mon 4/4	Peer Review	<i>Peer review of Story #3</i>

Week 14 Mon 4/18	Selling Your Work; Ethical & Legal Considerations	Read Ch. 8 & 10 (Friedlander); <i>Magazine Analysis #5 due</i>
Wed 4/20	Selling Your Work; Ethical & Legal Considerations	Read Ch. 8 & 10 (Friedlander)
Fri 4/22	Selling Your Work; Ethical & Legal Considerations	ONLINE CLASS: Query letter clinic
Week 15 Mon 4/25	Writing Day	In-class writing for Story #4
Wed 4/27	Revising/Editing Day	In-class revising/editing for Story #4; <i>rough drafts due by end of class</i>
Fri 4/29	Last day of classes; peer review	<i>Peer review of Story #4</i>
FINALS WEEK: STORY #4 DUE Wed., May 4 , noon		Story #4 due (drop off to Prof. Witmer's office)

COM 425: Feature Writing—Basic Feature Story Rubric

Student: _____ Section: _____ Date: _____

Story Title: _____

Objectives	Exemplary (4)	Accomplished (3)	Developing (2)	Beginning (1)	Score
Effective & Appropriate Lead	Lead is original & catchy; fits well with the rest of the story; invites readers into the piece; contains a strong nut graph if lead is not a summary lead	Lead is appropriate to story and fairly effective at getting attention; shows some signs of originality; contains an effective nut graph, if necessary	Lead is adequate but not extremely catchy or original; or there is no nut graph, even though it is necessary	Lead is neither original nor catchy; is boring, overused or trite, or is inappropriate to story; no nut graph	
Adequate Use of Primary Sources, Mainly Interviews	Evidence of reporter trying to get as many sources as necessary to adequately present all sides in the story; all are identified; info is properly attributed; all info	A minimum of three sources are used and clearly identified in story; most information is attributed to sources; information is accurate	Two or fewer sources are used; some sources are improperly identified or some info or opinion is given without attribution; most info is accurate but may not be	One or fewer sources used in story; or sources are improperly identified; much info is given without attribution; inaccurate or	

	is accurate, thorough; uses best sources		as thorough; missing key sources; may use too general info	vague info	
Quotes Show Evidence of Careful Reporting	Strong evidence of good research and interviewing by the use of effective, story-telling quotes that cover a broad range of the topic; good use of quote-transition formula	Most quotes show evidence of effective interviewing and use of good follow-up questions; quotes are interesting and story-telling	One or two of the quotes show evidence of good interviewing, but most do not help propel the story	Quotes are short, weak or ineffective; no evidence of follow-up questions being asked	
Effective Organization and Flow (deals with structure)	Story follows organization appropriate to the story type; strongly organized with clear transitions & logical connections that create a sense of being tightly woven together	Story is organized and most transitions and connections are clear, but either organization is somewhat lacking or the sense of flow is somewhat abrupt	Story lacks strong organization, jumps around too much or lacks effective transitions; not in inverted pyramid or proper alternate form	Story is choppy; organization is unclear; few effective transitions; not in inverted pyramid or proper alternate form	
Clear Focus and Unity (deals with content)	Focus of story is clear; nothing detracts from primary focus; everything contributes to overall angle	Focus is fairly clear but one or two areas detract from the primary angle	Story lacks strong sense of unity and focus; several areas seem to detract from angle	No clear angle; story is rambling and awkward	
Interesting & Effective Writing Style	Writing is strong & effective with a clear voice and a variety of sentence structures; piece is tightly written; utilizes active verbs & vivid word choice; original writing	Writing is adequate but not extremely compelling or original; may be wordy or voice may be unclear; diction and s/s may not be as vivid or sophisticated	Writing is rather bland; lacks a clear voice and/or sense of originality; is wordy or redundant; or diction &/or sentence structure may be repetitive	Writing lacks a clear voice & original style	
Journalistic Style	NO errors in journalistic style (incl. quotes, AP style); short paragraphs;	Has few (one or two) errors in journalistic style; or may have non-journalistic	Has several errors in journalistic style or non-journalistic	Has many errors in journalistic style and/or non-	

	quotes stand alone	paragraph structure	paragraph structure	journalistic paragraph structure	
Grammar and Spelling	Story is well edited and virtually flawless; NO spelling errors; includes proper spelling of all names	Story is spell-checked and all names are correct; contains few grammatical errors	Story is spell-checked & all names are correct; contains several grammatical errors	Names are misspelled; or spell check was not run; or contains many grammatical errors	
Format	No tabs at the beginning of grafs; proper manuscript format; complete story file & source list; double spaced w/ title, slug & word count	Missed one criteria	Missed two criteria	Missed three or more criteria	

Total Points:

Comments: