

J120: Introduction to Investigative Reporting

Instructor: Thomas Peele

GSI: Sonner Kehrt and Sarah Abusaba

Location: Kroeber Hall #160

M, T, W 2-4, Th 2-3:30pm

3 units

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Course objectives

The objective of this course is to introduce students to the tools and techniques used in investigative reporting and to provide a deeper understanding of the craft and its' importance. The prerequisite for this course is J100, Introduction to News Reporting.

Whether their stories are about national security, official misconduct and corruption, or the bizarre claims of a U.S. president, investigative reporters play a crucial role in democracy. Rogues, outsiders, muckrakers, they expose secrets, realities and conditions that powerful interests want undisclosed. The best investigative reporters – from Ida Tarbell, Upton Sinclair and I.F. Stone to Woodward and Bernstein, Seymour Hersh, Glenn Greenwald, Matt Apuzzo – change the way people understand and think about and the world.

Students will read, view and dissect great works of investigative reporting by early hell-raisers like Tarbell and Nellie Bly to Sy Hersh's groundbreaking work on the My Lai Massacre to what contemporary reporters are digging up on POTUS Trump. They will also examine investigations that went wrong such as the Cincinnati Enquirer's Chiquita Banana probe, and Rolling Stone magazine's UVA rape story. Students will also hear from numerous guest speakers, who will explain their own investigative work as well as the laws and legal principles that enable and protect it.

Students will identify how to find sources, obtain and triangulate documents that allow reporters to tell stories that get behind government and corporate curtains.

This course is both an introduction to the practice of investigative reporting as well as an opportunity for students to gain practical experience working collaboratively.

How the class will work

It is unreasonable to expect students with minimal backgrounds in journalism to both learn investigative journalism and complete an investigative project all in six weeks. Instead, this class will concentrate on learning skills and techniques while also studying great works of investigative journalism and hearing from masters of the craft. Working with an assigned partner for the class, students will conduct interviews and write (some) papers together. They will search for a topic ripe for investigation and propose how they would pursue long-term journalism about it.

Learning Objectives

In this course students will work toward proficiency in how professional journalists investigate leads, use public records and other sources to unearth or verify buried or hidden information. Students will:

- Learn the constitutional rights of Americans and the free press to challenge and confront all levels of government and powerful institutions and the adversarial nature of investigative reporting.
- Learn to take copious and contemporaneous notes and maintain both a professional reporter's notebook and backed up electronic files that are critical to long-term investigative journalism.
- Learn techniques for pursuing government records that are often at the heart of an investigative reporters work.
- Learn the basic operations of state and federal courts and how to locate court records and become literate in them. They will become familiar with affidavits, complaints, depositions, exhibits, and other records vital to investigative reporting.
- Learn techniques needed to background individuals and acquire information about their real estate holdings, divorces, professional licenses, disclosure statements and criminal histories.
- Learn advanced interviewing techniques. How to be able go back to a subject multiple times and maintain access. How do you prepare for a confrontational interview? Is there really no such thing as a dumb question? How to avoid bias.
- Learn to develop sources. How do investigative reporters build long-term relationships with people who may risk their jobs – and maybe even prison – to provide them with information.
- Learn to identify, pitch and outline investigative story ideas. What works? What doesn't? How do you formulate a fresh idea and convince an editor it is worth months of your time to investigate.
- Learn to appreciate that ethical dilemmas may arise when handling sensitive information.

Schedule:

Week 1: Class overview, assignment of class partner, short autobiography due, guest speaker on legal issues, quiz on legal issues, read work of upcoming guest speaker.

Week 2. Guest speaker, write paper on guest speaker's presentation, presentation on investigative reporters in American history, Bly and Stone, quiz on same, lectures on basic records and backgrounding individuals, backgrounding assignment, interviewing techniques, read work of upcoming guest speaker.

Week 3. Guest speaker, write paper on speaker's presentation, presentation on Hersh, quiz on Hersh and backgrounding techniques, presentation on government administrative records and court records, assignments on court records, read work of upcoming guest speaker.

Week 4: Guest speaker, write paper on speaker's presentation, presentation on Watergate, quiz on court records, presentations on business and real estate records, working with your partner on the pitch of investigative story.

Week 5: Guest speaker, write paper on guest speaker's presentation, interview with investigative reporter due, draft of investigative story pitch with your partner due for review, final quiz on business and real estate records.

Week 6: Final exam in terminology and techniques, final draft of investigative pitch due, notebook and typed version of notes do for review. Class celebration.

Detailed class schedules week by week will be posted on bCourses the weekend before each week of instruction.

GRADING: This class will be graded on an overall point system based on papers, quizzes, attendance, class participation, keeping strong notes and a final exam. A grading schematic will be posted on bCourses and available the first day of class.

Attendance and timeliness:

Berkeley time does not exist for this class. Instruction will begin at 2 p.m. This means students must be checked in and seated not later than 2 p.m. Anyone arriving after 2:05 p.m. with the permission of the instructor will have points deducted from their grades. Promptness is a journalistic virtue. Reporters who show up late can miss the story. Learning that begins here.

Attendance is mandatory. Unexcused absences will count against students' final grade. The more unexcused absences a student has, the greater the penalty for each will be. Absences will only be excused at the instructor's discretion and must be based on a valid reason. All absences must be excused in advance.

Student Conduct

Students will abide by the Student Code of Conduct <http://students.berkeley.edu/uga/conduct.asp>. There is a zero tolerance policy for work that is submitted without proper attribution and that constitutes plagiarism. If students are unsure about the expectations regarding the Student Code of Conduct, please seek advice from the instructor.