

**JCOM 1130 (The Online Edition) – Newswriting**  
**Professor Ted Pease** ([ted.pease@usu.edu](mailto:ted.pease@usu.edu))  
Department of Journalism & Communication  
Utah State University  
Fall 2009

**Class times: Online, 24/7**  
**Newsroom**—Your computer

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**Office Hours:** daily by email [ted.pease@usu.edu](mailto:ted.pease@usu.edu)

### **Preamble: Some Wisdom**

*“Why should freedom of speech and freedom of the press be allowed? Why should a government which is doing what it believes to be right allow itself to be criticized? It would not allow opposition by lethal weapons. Ideas are much more fatal than guns.”*  
—**Nikolai Lenin**, 1920

*“Were it left to me to decide whether to have government without newspapers, or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate to prefer the latter.”*  
—**Thomas Jefferson**, 1789

*“Question Authority!”* —**1970s slogan**

*“Words are sacred. They deserve respect. If you get the right ones, in the right order, you can nudge the world a little.”*  
—**Tom Stoppard**, playwright, 1967

*“A sentence goes off course when it meanders toward its destination, gathering stray bits along the way. Hitting the target always means perfect focus—clear head, clear eye, true aim.”*  
—**Paula LaRoque**, newspaper writing coach, 2007

*“What the F(\*&^%\$#\$%^&\*?!?????)!”*  
—**Jon Stewart**, fake journalist, Comedy Central, 2009

*“Writing is an important test of thinking. If you cannot express a point in writing, you probably have not thought it through. A murky story is usually a sign of muddy reasoning or, at best, a thought that is only half-formed.”*  
—**William L. Rivers**, journalism professor, 1979

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### **Prerequisites:**

Minimum pass in JCOM English-Grammar Proficiency Test (EGUT) through the main JCOM office; ENG 1010. Functioning brain and online computer connection.

### **What we do:**

This is a writing course. It’s a reporting course. So, we report, we write. A lot. Write, write, write, write, write, write, write. Report, report, report, report, report, report, report.

Make sense?

There is one thing that’s **very different** about this section of JCOM 1130: The entire class in online. We will never meet or talk, except in cyberspace or email. You will do your own work on your own schedule, and do assignments based on a detailed schedule that you will find on USU’s

Blackboard and on our own, dedicated blog, **NewsHounds Online**

(<http://newshoundsonline.blogspot.com/2008/11/index-newshounds-online.html>).

Aside from these differences in delivery, this class—and this syllabus—is the same as the one you'd be taking face-to-face (f2f) while sitting in Room 302 high atop the Animal Science Building on the Utah State University campus.

In JCOM 1130, you will start to learn what news is and how to write it. For those of you who are really JCOM majors and who really will have mass communication careers—in print and broadcast journalism, public relations and other related fields—if I do my job and you do yours, this will be the most important foundation course of your college career. “No brag, just fact.” (Extra points for those of you who can identify that quote—post it to **NewsTalk Week 1** discussion on the Blackboard discussion site: **NewsTalk**. Post anything else you see about news that strikes you as important or weird or whatever there as well.)

**A guarantee:** Even if you hate what we're about to do and never take another journalism course again, if you do what I ask you to do during these 15 weeks, the rest of your college career (and your later career) will come easier. Because what newswriting is all about isn't just news or writing—it's about *thinking* and *organization*. You'll gather information more efficiently. You'll ask better questions. You'll look at facts more critically. You'll sift and make sense of information more quickly. You'll synthesize the most important parts of your news story more effectively. And what you write will make more sense to those who read it. You won't be smarter, but you'll be better organized and have tools to make better use of the smarts you have. No brag, just fact.

That means that the base we build together between now and May—critical thinking, fact-gathering and writing skills—is important, because the habits and skills you develop here will stay with you. We'll write a lot, learning what news is (and isn't) and what newswriting is, learning how to examine masses of information critically and make sense of it for others who read what you write or hear what you say. Newswriting is a strange beastie with quirks and characteristics all its own, quite unlike the writing you've learned in your English classes. Some of you may have to unlearn some things you've been taught about writing and relearn journalistic methods for communicating information. It's not rocket science, but there are some tricks to learn.

This syllabus should be considered our contract. We'll fine-tune it as we go along; some things will be rescheduled, subtracted or added. But, basically, this is it: If you do what I ask you to do, you'll be a better writer. If you don't do what I ask you to do, your grades will reflect that. OK?

Since this is a news course, and this is a journalism department, I think it's reasonable to expect you to keep up with the news. To that end, I'll require that you read a newspaper every day, preferably more than one, either in the dead-tree version (paper) or online. Make sure that you get to visit *The New York Times*, MSNBC, the *Logan Herald-Journal*, *The Salt Lake Tribune*, National Public Radio, *The Utah Statesman*, *The Washington Post*, KSL-TV, Slate.com, *The Deseret News*, *le Monde*, CNN, the Hard News Café (<http://www.hardnewscafe.usu.edu/>), the BBC ..... or some combination of that every day. Many of the URLs for these courses are listed as **Hotlinks** on **NewsHoundsOnline** (<http://newshoundsonline.blogspot.com/>). Once a week, you will post your Top 10 news stories of the week to the **NewsTalk** on Blackboard (see the **News Quizzes** entry on the NewsHounds Online Index page <http://newshoundsonline.blogspot.com/2008/11/index-newshounds-online.html>). You also will begin receiving daily emails from the professor: **Today's WORD on Journalism**, now in its 14<sup>th</sup> year, is a daily spam of wisdom on journalism, writing & etc., that goes to some 1,700 deranged subscribers worldwide. You may also see the WORDblog and archives at <http://tedsword.blogspot.com/>

### Required texts and whatnot:

- Tim Harrower, *Inside Reporting* (1st edition, 2007).

- *The Associated Press Stylebook*.
- Newspapers (online or dead-tree), TV News (and that would probably not include Fox News) and other local, national and international daily news sources.
- **RECOMMENDED:** Every writer should own and read (& reread periodically) *The Elements of Style*, by Strunk & White (available online at <http://www.bartleby.com/141/>). Also highly recommended: *On Writing Well*, by William Zinsser, and *The Elements of Journalism*, by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosensteel.
- And everyone should watch Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show* and Stephen Colbert on *The Colbert Report* as often as possible. After Walter Cronkite's death in Summer 2009, Jon Stewart was named "the most trusted man in America." I dunno about that, but he's pretty good, and can be very funny.
- Full bibliography of great journalism books available.

Readings from the text will be assigned, and are outlined as part of your weekly assignments on *NewsHounds Online* through Blackboard (check index in upper left corner of splash page for full listing). Past students have complained that they didn't read the text. So you will be quizzed weekly on the readings to remind you to do so. The *AP Stylebook* should become your writing and stylistic bible—we will have regular quizzes on that stuff. You may also want to purchase a paperback dictionary if you're not such a hot speller (you know who you are!). Do NOT depend on spellcheck! Spelling errors will cost you points.

### What you get:

A student who successfully completes this course—does everything that's assigned on time—will be a better writer, a better critical thinker, a better synthesizer and consumer of news and information. Further, you will acquire an understanding of and competence in the following:

- **News & feature values:** What is and what isn't news. And how to write both so people read it.
- **News-gathering techniques:** How to find and develop a story, how to find and use sources, how to obtain and confirm essential facts.
- **Newswriting techniques:** Once you have the facts, what do you do with them? Story structure & organization, writing clearly and concisely, interpreting and presenting facts for the reader, news style, surviving deadline pressure.
- **Audiences:** Who reads what you write and why? Framing stories for the audience.
- **Editing & style:** Newswriting mechanics—grammar, usage, basic copyediting and AP style.
- **Journalism ethics:** Not an oxymoron! (If you don't know what an oxymoron is, look it up!) A free and credible press is essential to a free participatory democracy. Without credibility, journalism is just noise.
- **Libel law:** Basics of mass comm law, including libel and privacy issues.

Each week's work will focus on reading, quizzes and filing writing assignments. I will provide specific and general feedback on each week's writing, and then we'll do it again; there also will be lectures and discussions of journalistic issues. This is a *participatory* class, so I expect you to raise issues and problems you see in the press on the NewsTalk discussion board, and I expect you to respond to each other's opinion (civilly and smartly!). In addition, we'll talk about current events and issues raised in the readings. During the latter half of the semester, you will find your own stories—breaking news and features—which you will "publish" on the website for critique and feedback from each other. Reporting assignments may include covering speeches, meetings and news conferences; interviews, and developing in-depth feature stories. Good local stories will be submitted for publication to **The Utah Statesman** (<http://www.usu-tube.com>) or the **Hard News Café**, JCOM's award-winning online news "paper" (<http://www.hardnewscafe.usu.edu>) or for those of you not in Logan, perhaps to your local community newspaper. I can help with that.

### Schedule:

Detailed week-by-week assignments and deadlines are available online through Blackboard, at the NewsHounds Online website (see **Index** at <http://newshoundsonline.blogspot.com/2008/11/index-newshounds-online.html>).

### Grades & assignments:

Grading in this course will be based on your production. Generally, all assignments are graded on a 10-point scale, with later, more complicated assignment weighted more heavily than the earlier ones. A 10 is publishable now (and not expected in this class), 9 is excellent (also rare), 7s & 8s are very good, 6 is OK but needs work, anything lower is below expectations. Some stories may be rewritten with my permission. Each story also will be graded on the basis of a) content, organization and structure, and b) mechanics (spelling, grammar, syntax, etc.).

Final grades will be based on your story grade average, compared with the rest of the class, and on your improvement over the quarter and progress toward meeting the professional standards expected of all journalists. The total grade will also include quizzes, a midterm and final, and other assignments.

### Grading specifics (see Gradesheet):

**Basic assignments:** 10 points each (including both content and mechanics)

**More advanced (outside) assignments:** 20-60, depending on degree of difficulty

**NewsTalk:** weekly discussions and participation count; details to follow.

**Spelling (SP#!!)** errors cost 1 point each.

**Punctuation (PUNCT!)** errors cost 1/2-point each.

**AP Style (STYLE!)** errors will cost you 1/2-point each after the third week. (See Editor Notes.)

**Fact errors (FE\*!!!)** are good for a pink slip in the real world—here they'll get you a zero (0) for the assignment. A factual error is defined as an error of fact (e.g.: a misspelling of a proper noun or name—Logan Mayor Randy *Watson*; President *Barrack* Obama; Utah Gov. *Joe* Huntsman, etc.) or a glaring error of fact (i.e.: "*The Utah Jazz are the best team in the NBA*" or, "*The Cache Valley is renowned for its voluptuous citrus crop,*" etc.). To avoid the pain that errors of spelling, punctuation, AP style and fact can inflict, keep your *AP Stylebook* close and consult it regularly, turn to dictionaries when in doubt, and always use your brains (or Google) to question "facts."

Obviously, **DEADLINES ARE ABSOLUTE**. That's why they're called *deadlines*. In the real world, missing deadlines means you don't get in the paper; in JCOM 1130, missing deadline means zero for the assignment.

### Housekeeping Details:

Some cautions, instructions and threats. Ask anyone; Pease is an irascible old poop and can be testy at times. Here are some suggestions:

- Visit NewsHounds through Blackboard every day.
- Consult the weekly schedule through Blackboard on NewsHounds Online (Go to **Index**); completing assignments on deadline is *your responsibility!*
- Some wise person once advised: "*He who asks is a fool for five minutes. He who does not is a fool forever.*" So if you're confused, don't be a fool—**Email the professor!**
- Expect pop quizzes on anything from the news to geography.
- Online participation is mandatory.
- Consult your *Stylebook* regularly.
- If you're a lousy speller, use a dictionary religiously.

### "Attendance," Honesty & Other Stuff:

**"Attendance":** For CyberHounds, "attendance" happens online, but it's the same basic thing: You *must* participate often. If I don't hear from you weekly, I'll assume you've dropped. Regard this class as a professional commitment; I do. Stay on top of the assignments and file your stuff on

time. No makeups. In the real world, you can't make up a missed assignment, so don't even ask if you can here.

**If you have some emergency that prevents you from doing your NewsHounds work, let me know.** If I think you have a reasonable excuse, we'll figure out make-up work. In the real world, excuses don't count for much and are unbecoming to a professional: If you miss the story, you may soon be out of work.

**Academic Honesty:** The University expects students and faculty alike to maintain the highest standards of academic honesty (for a complete definition, see University Catalogue or the Code of Policies and Procedures for Students at Utah State University, Article V, Section 3). The policy states: "[C]heating, falsification or plagiarism can result in warning, grade reduction, probation, suspension, expulsion, payment of damages, withholding of transcripts, withholding of degrees, removal a class, performance of community service, referral to appropriate counseling" or other penalties as the university judiciary may deem appropriate.

**JCOM Department Academic Honesty Policy:** Because public trust and personal credibility are essential to journalists and other professional communicators, the JCOM department observes a zero-tolerance policy regarding academic dishonesty: As per the USU Student Code, any documented form of academic dishonesty—including plagiarism—will result in an automatic F in the course and a report to the department head, the dean of the college and the USU vice president for student services. JCOM students who engage in documented academic dishonesty may be dropped from the major, upon a hearing with the student, the instructor, and the department head. Any suspicious work may be submitted to a database that compares student papers to other student and published work in a web database.

If you have any questions about what's acceptable work under strict codes of academic honesty, see the USU Code of Policies and Procedures for Students, or consult your professor. Any suspicious work may be submitted to a database that compares student papers to other student and published work in a web database. FYI: About plagiarism and how to avoid it, see <http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml>

**JCOM Advising:** In order to ensure that JCOM students progress through the major efficiently, the JCOM Department requires that all students meet with the department's adviser (Reid Furniss), or with a peer adviser or a faculty adviser, each semester prior to pre-registration. An academic hold will be placed on all JCOM majors and pre-majors each semester until students have obtained advising, either individually with an adviser or in one of several group advising sessions that will take place prior to the pre-registration period. Academic holds on student records will be lifted upon presentation of a signed advising form to the JCOM office. For questions, see the JCOM adviser.

**JCOM course repeat policy:** Students may take required JCOM classes only twice, with department permission; failure to achieve minimum grades (3.0 in JCOM coursework) will result in students being dropped from the major. Students who do not achieve a B or better in JCOM 1130 will not be permitted to advance in the major. Consult with the JCOM adviser on these issues.

**Professional portfolios:** JCOM students who have the best success in landing internships and jobs after graduation are those who compile a portfolio of professional-quality work. This portfolio may include work produced in JCOM courses, labs, and internships. You should make it a habit to maintain an ongoing file of coursework and other materials that will reflect the quality of your work—class essays and papers, newspaper clips, video or Powerpoint presentations, websites, fliers or brochures, etc. Start now so that you will have a comprehensive file from which to select your best work to make up a professional portfolio and WOW employers.

**Decorum:** We're all in this together. That means that we will need each other to succeed. And that means that everyone is expected to treat everyone else with fairness, courtesy and honesty. Disruptive or disrespectful behavior in NewsTalk or other NewsHound Online interactions will result in loss of points toward your final grade; repeaters will be dropped from the class. Please apply the Golden Rule.

**Disability accommodations:** If a student has a disability that will require some accommodation by the instructor, the student must contact the instructor and document the disability through the Disability Resource Center (7-2444), preferably during the first week of the course. Any requests for special considerations must be discussed with and approved by the instructor. In cooperation

with the Disability Resource Center, course materials may be provided in alternative formats, large print, audio, diskette, or Braille.

**Disclaimer:** The instructor has no desire to offend anyone's personal or cultural beliefs, and he apologizes in advance if he does so inadvertently. But students should be aware that journalism often deals with issues and content that some may find disagreeable—from profanity and offensive attitudes in sources to grisly accidents and other stuff that may make you uncomfortable. But that's the business—covering society in all its grittiness, and helping readers/viewers/citizens make sense of the world around them. It's a critically important job in a free society that sometimes requires the journalist to develop a thick skin, a strong stomach and a certain cynicism.

**Finally, any rumors that you may have heard that Pease is a heartless, obdurate, irritable, demanding, tough, pugnacious, unpleasant SOB probably falls short (and wide) of the truth. The fact is that I will press you hard this semester to develop the level of professional skill required for success in a mass communications career. But if you're having a problem—with this class or anything else—please feel free to contact me for a talk, career advice, a crying towel or whatever.**

Specific assignments in the **Weakly Stuff Index** on Newshounds

(<http://newshoundsonline.blogspot.com/2008/11/index-newshounds-online.html>)