

# JOURNALISM 5350.005 Narrative Business Journalism

## SYLLABUS

**Dr. John P. Hayes**  
**University of North Texas**

Journalism 5350.005 begins on Tuesday, January 19, 2010 and meets weekly through May 11, 2010. The course does not meet the week of March 15, Spring Break.

**Course Objectives:** To help you learn how to develop, research, and write narrative business articles and books for traditional and new media. The course will focus on the mechanics of how to identify and pursue narrative business topics; how to develop the necessary skills to research these topics and write in narrative style; and ultimately how and where to get published as a narrative business writer, while also examining the issues that face practitioners in traditional and new media. While course content will emphasize storytelling, the course will teach the fundamentals of business reporting, including how to decipher financial statements and analyze business statistics, how to understand the organization and culture of the workplace, and the increasing role that government and law play in the workings of business. While the narrative business writer may be interested in a variety of industries and topics, i.e. sports, media, health, government, entertainment, etc. the narrative business writer pursues and examines the business story behind the story. This is the age of narrative business journalism and these are the stories that steal the headlines and captivate readers in all forms of media. This course satisfies the interests of aspiring as well as working writers and journalists who want to study and ultimately master the craft of business storytelling. You will meet business journalists and editors, and other professionals who can help you achieve your goals as a narrative writer. The course will also help you develop professional contacts to secure internships and jobs in key business media outlets.

**Course Requirements:** Class members are expected to attend class sessions and actively participate in the discussions. Class sessions will include lectures about specific business beats, industries, business sources, writing techniques and skills. Some class sessions will include guest speakers and field trips. **Reading assignments** are listed for many class sessions; the assignments are to be read *prior* to the respective session.

**Writing assignments:** Each class member is required to produce (1) a narrative profile (1,000 to 2,000 words) that features one business leader, *and* (2) an in-depth business narrative (minimum 2,500 words) on a topic to be approved by the professor. Please allow time to develop your assignments, to research them, and write them. Some class time will be allocated for working on the assignments, but you should schedule time to complete the assignments – including time for research,

gathering data, and interviews – outside of class. I expect you to produce *outstanding* narratives and I'll assist you in the process.

**Mayborn Competition:** Class members are encouraged to enter their narratives in the Business Narrative competition at the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference, sponsored by the Frank W. Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism at the University of North Texas. The conference will occur July 23-25, 2010 in Grapevine. Cash prizes will be awarded and details will be discussed in class. Bloomberg recently recognized UNT's expertise in narrative journalism by awarding the Mayborn School an annual Bloomberg Lectures Series in Narrative Business Journalism.

**Grading:** Final grade will be determined as follows:

30% = mid-term narrative profile

40% = final business narrative

15% = class participation

15% = 3 query letters

A = A narrative suitable for publication.

B = A narrative suitable for publication but needs minor editing and editorial enhancement.

C = A narrative that may be suitable for publication but needs extensive editing and rewriting. May include flawed structure and poor utilization of narrative techniques.

D = A narrative that's not suitable for publication without additional research and extensive rewriting.

F = A narrative that's seriously flawed in writing and conclusions.

**Please note:** Good business reporting involves numbers, names, and data. Errors are not acceptable and multiple errors in a narrative will result in an F. Each misspelled word in a narrative lowers the grade by one letter. Consult the business news section in the AP Stylebook.

**Deadlines:** Journalism is a deadline business. Please meet the deadlines in this syllabus. Please don't ask for extensions.

## **Course Description**

*Making sense of business.*

*How do we know what's true? How do we know who to trust? How do we get at the real story, that is, the story behind the story?*

In an age when no one seems to trust business – and especially not business leaders -- *making sense of business* has become an increasingly complex challenge for everyone who seeks meaning, which is everyone who sits down to read a newspaper, a newsletter, a blog, an e-zine, a book or an e-book, or to watch or listen to a broadcast or podcast. It's *everyone* who consumes media.

However, satisfying the interests of *everyone* (or at least as many consumers as possible), requires media to rely on more than just traditional reporters or journalists. Today's legacy and new media seek the special qualities of narrative journalists who can skillfully define the story behind the story, then research, shape and write a story that is informative, entertaining, and significant. The journalist who pursues and masters storytelling qualities and skills is the journalist who will be published and employed through the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is especially true for business journalists because there's increasing demand for meaningful business stories.

As humans – *consumers of media* – we love stories because we grew up with them. We think, feel, speak, listen, explain, learn and understand through narratives. For people to have any chance of making sense of business, they will turn to skilled narrative business journalists. Thus, the importance of this course.

During this semester, we will look at how storytelling enhances business journalism, how to identify, pursue and capture business narratives through research, investigation and interviews, how to apply storytelling skills to business narratives, how to write business narratives effectively, and ultimately how to get paid to write and produce business narratives.

## **Course Outline**

### **Week 1: Exploring the Power & Potential of Business Narrative Writing**

Introductions.

Course requirements/expectations.

Information about reading materials and resources.

FOCUS: Business news is changing – how so? We'll define the business story and examine how traditional business reporting differs from narrative business reporting. Where's the market for business narrative? We'll look at why consumers prefer business narrative to traditional journalism, and discuss the components of compelling business narrative. We'll examine business narratives in various media.

### **Week 2: Defining A Business Beat**

FOCUS: Name the industry or sector and there's a business beat behind it. Health, entertainment, sports, nonprofits, media, associations, education – all rely on business principles to exist. What do you want to cover? What do consumers want

to know? What will traditional and new media want to report -- how and when? We'll discuss traditional business beats, including SEC, Federal Reserve, SBA, etc., even bankruptcy, where many important stories have been uncovered in recent years.

GUEST: (To Be Determined. Dallas Business Beat Reporter)

Reading Assignment: (To Be Determined)

[Business Reporters Hit The Right Keys](#)

[Taking on the Trust](#)

[Tools to Separate Good and Bad Nonprofits](#)

### **Week 3: Writing about the Business of Business**

FOCUS: Numbers, ratios, percentages, governance, takeovers, mergers, financial statements, earnings documents, EBITDA – *are you asleep yet?* We'll spend a session examining corporate governance, getting familiar with the terms, understanding the business of business, and then we'll explore how to use this information to keep our readers reading and not falling asleep. What's the significance of this information to the writer and ultimately how does the writer make the information meaningful to the 21<sup>st</sup> century multi-media consumer? Reporting numbers without turning off the audience!

Using the EDGAR Database ... <http://www.sec.gov/index.htm>

GUEST: Tom Buckley, CFO, The Dwyer Group, Inc.

*Making Sense of Financial Statements and Earnings Documents*

Reading Assignment: (I'll assign specific chapters/sections)

*Understanding Financial Statements: A Journalist's Guide*, Jay Taparia

*Bottom Line Writing: Reporting the Sense of Dollars*, Conrad C. Fink

*Show me the Money: Writing Business and Economics Stories for Mass*

*Communication*, Chris Roush

*Profits and Losses: Business Journalism and its role in Society*, Chris Roush

[Tips To Make Numbers Your Best Friend](#)

[Make Sense of Numbers In Writing About Business](#)

### **Week 4: Interviewing Business Leaders & Sources**

FOCUS: Class members will have had experience conducting interviews, but perhaps not as a narrative business writer. What's the difference? What's the narrative writer looking for in an interview? We'll discuss how to get CEOs and other business leaders and sources to agree to interviews. Where and when? What are the techniques you can develop and utilize to interview more effectively? How do you build rapport with the creative CEO? Or one who's stressed because the numbers

aren't adding up to profits? Should you record the interview? We'll explore ways to ask "hot" or sensitive questions. How to avoid getting "no comment" answers. How to follow up without agreeing to let the subject "approve" your story. During an interview, it's important that the narrative writer gets more of the story than just answers.

Reading Assignment: (To Be Determined) Selections from:

*The Craft of Interviewing*, John Brady

[Getting Settled](#)

### **Week 5: Writing Business Narratives - Part I**

FOCUS: We will examine prize-winning business narratives to identify storytelling techniques. What are the components of a successful business narrative? We'll discuss plotting, cause-resolution, flashback, forecasting and other skills that the business narrative writer must accomplish.

GUEST: (To Be Determined)

Tom Hallman, Jr. (Pulitzer Prize winner/narrative journalist)

### **Week 6: Writing Business Narratives - Part II**

Reading Assignment: (To Be Determined)

[Business Investigations: When There Isn't Time](#)

### **Week 7: Critiquing Your Business Profile**

FOCUS: Each class member will have written a narrative business profile and will share it with the class. (Please bring a sufficient number of copies of your narrative to class). Members will provide editorial guidance to enhance the profile. We will focus on quality of writing, storytelling technique, and publication outlets.

### **Week 8: Covering the Business Of Sports**

FOCUS: The business of sports occurs off the field, off the court, and often behind closed doors. Few subjects are more important to readers than the business of sports, and the narrative writer can choose from a variety of local, regional, national, and international story opportunities. Often times the story isn't about the players, the coaches or the owners – it's about public policies, public funds, regional pride, economic development, elected officials and ultimately how the business of sports hits consumers in the pocketbook!

GUEST: (To Be Determined)

Reading Assignment: (To Be Determined)

Writing Assignment: Write a query letter proposing a sports-related business narrative. Turn in this assignment in Week 9.

### **Week 9: Covering the Business of Health**

FOCUS: From the pharmacy to the manufacturing plant to the halls of Congress to the regulatory agencies to the consumer's wallet, health care is huge business – and nowadays few topics are getting more sustained media coverage. In the United States, health care grows faster than the economy – currently at 16% of GDP, it's projected to rise to 20% by 2015! The industry is complex. It's not just about doctors and hospitals and medical labs – it includes hospital and nursing home chains, public, private and nonprofit enterprises, government-owned facilities, and even hospitals run by religious orders. Underlying everything, of course, is the quality of care for patients. We'll take a broad look at the industry and then zero in on specific story opportunities.

GUEST: (To Be Determined)

Merrill Goozner, Center for Science in the Public Interest

Reading Assignment: (To Be Determined)

[Tracking The Business Behind The Tomato  
Covering Dollars and Doctors](#)

Writing Assignment: Write a query letter proposing a health-related business narrative. Turn in this assignment in Week 10.

### **Week 10: Getting Published**

FOCUS: There's increasing demand among media for business narrative writing. We'll explore opportunities with newspapers, magazines, newsletters, online portals, books (including eBooks), radio and TV. Requirements for acceptance. How to approach editors, producers, agents. What's selling? For how much?

GUEST: (To Be Determined)

Reading Assignment: (To Be Determined)

[Embracing a Web World](#)

### **Week 11: Writing About Business: Small, Big, Public & Private**

FOCUS: We'll explore the differences and similarities between private and public companies then examine the relevance of SEC filings, the Sarbanes Oxley Act, Secretary of State filings, and more, as sources of information for covering business entities. A great source of information for businesses of all sizes and types comes from the banking community. What do banks want to know about the operations of the businesses they support?

GUEST: (To Be Determined)  
Investment Banker

Reading Assignment: (To Be Determined)  
Selections from *Show me the Money: Writing Business and Economics Stories for Mass Communication*, Chris Roush  
[The Wal-Mart You Don't Know](#)  
[The Toll of a New Machine](#)  
[Covering Small Businesses](#)

Writing Assignment: Write a query letter proposing a small business or public business narrative. Turn in this assignment in Week 12.

### **Week 12: Field Trip to the Federal Reserve Board of Dallas**

Deadline: Your business narrative is due this week; provide copies for each class member. Read all the narratives and critique prior to our class meeting during Week 14.

### **Week 13: Critiquing Your Business Narrative**

FOCUS: Each class member will have written a business narrative suitable for publication (and, if the student so desires, to be entered in the Business Narrative competition at the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference). Narratives will be shared among class members for critique. Emphasis will be placed on quality of writing, storytelling technique, and probability for publication.

### **Week 14: Critiquing Your Business Narrative**

### **Suggested Reading List & Other Resources**

*Writing About Business: The New Columbia Knight-Bagehot Guide to Economic and Business Journalism*, Terri Thompson, ed.

*Bottom Line Writing: Reporting the Sense of Dollars*, Conrad C. Fink

*Understanding Financial Statements: A Journalist's Guide*, Jay Taparia

*Financial statement analysis: a global perspective*, T. Robinson et al

*24 Days: How Two Wall Street Journal Reporters Uncovered the Lies that Destroyed Faith in Corporate America*, Rebecca Smith and John Emshwiler

*Show me the Money: Writing Business and Economics Stories for Mass Communication*, Chris Roush

*Profits and Losses: Business Journalism and its role in Society*, Chris Roush

*Investing for Dummies*, Eric Tyson

*Personal Finance for Dummies*, Eric Tyson

Business Journalism blog: <http://weblogs.jomc.unc.edu/talkingbiznews>

History of Business Journalism Web site: <http://www.bizjournalismhistory.org>

International Association for Literary Journalism Studies: <http://www.ialjs.org/>

Poynter/News University Webinars <http://webinars.newsu.org>

BusinessJournalism.org Business Glossary  
<http://www.businessjournalism.org/businessglossary>

Blog: Your Daily Tipsheet  
<http://www.businessjournalism.org/yourdailytipsheet/>

Blog: Make It Great  
<http://www.businessjournalism.org/makeitgreat/>

Blog: Footnoted.org (information about SEC filings)  
<http://www.footnoted.org>

SECWatch  
<http://secwatch.com/index.jsp>

**Bad Weather:** As long as the university is open, the course will meet as scheduled. Use your own judgment if weather creates dangerous driving conditions.

**Intellectual Property Protection:** Lectures in this course are the property of the instructor and guest speakers. Class lectures may not be recorded in any form without prior permission from the instructor and any guest lecturers that may speak to the class. Recordings, including class notes, may not be used for commercial purposes. All rights reserved.

**Disabilities:** The Journalism Department, in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, makes reasonable accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. If you require any such accommodation, please contact the instructor within the first three weeks of class.



## Contact Information

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## Statement of Student Learning Outcomes, UNT Journalism

Since 1969, the UNT Department of Journalism (Mayborn School of Journalism effective September 1, 2009) has been accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. This national accreditation also extends to the Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism, the only accredited professional master's program in Texas. About one-fourth of all journalism and mass communication programs in the United States are accredited by ACEJMC. National accreditation enhances your education here, because it certifies that the department and graduate institute adhere to many standards established by the council. Among these standards are student learning outcomes, covered by journalism courses in all sequences.

This course, JOUR 5350.005, will help to meet the student learning outcomes below. Each graduate must:



Demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of groups in a global society in relationship to communications.

Understand concepts and apply theories in the use and presentation of images and information.

Work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity.

Think critically, creatively and independently.

Conduct research and evaluate information by methods appropriate to the communications professions in which they work.

Write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communications professions, audiences and purposes they serve.

Apply tools and technologies appropriate for the communications professions in which they work.

