

SYLLABUS: Journalistic Writing (JRN 3050), Fall 2019

Professor: Gregg Birnbaum, adjunct assistant professor

Class hours: This hybrid class meets from 9:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m., on Fridays, VC 7-160 (Studio H)

Office hours: After class, 11:05 a.m.-12 p.m.; cubicle 7-260F in the journalism department offices

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LEARNING GOALS:

- Master the basics of reporting and writing news stories.
- Gain proficiency in: Understanding and identifying news; generating story ideas and finding angles; writing leads (ledes) and comprehensive, well-organized stories; interviewing and using quotes and paraphrase effectively; covering a beat; and finding and developing sources.
- Sharpen writing skills through in-class Writing Labs and home assignments and by analyzing story structure and use of language, and by authoring clear and accurate spot stories, longer hard news and enterprise pieces, and features/profiles.
- Become familiar with the latest tools and techniques of digital journalism and multi-media storytelling, and with social media platforms.
- Build knowledge about ethics, best practices, highest industry standards and how to avoid mistakes, as well as current issues in the field, such as “fake news,” fact checking and media bias.
- Develop the ability to meet deadlines.
- Learn how to think like a journalist.

PREREQUISITES:

- Curiosity about what’s happening in the world around you and what it means.
- Enjoy listening, talking, discussing.
- Like to read, write; interested in the media, journalism.
- Embrace constructive criticism, use it to improve.

INSTRUCTOR BIO:

Professor Birnbaum is the Senior Politics Editor at NBCNews.com, where he supervises online coverage of the White House, Congress, federal agencies, as well as national politics, including the 2020 presidential election. Previously, Professor Birnbaum was a Senior Editor on the CNN.com politics team from 2015-2017, handling breaking news, the politics live blog, as well as defense/national security coverage. Other positions held by Professor Birnbaum include: Managing Editor/Head of Political Content, New York Daily News; Deputy Managing Editor, POLTICIO; and Political Editor, The New York Post.

Professor Birnbaum has been in the news business for more than 30 years as a reporter and editor, beginning his career — and his love affair with journalism — as a “copy kid” at The Wall Street Journal. He received his Master of Science degree from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University and has been teaching at Baruch since 2014.

GROUND RULES:

- **Be on time. If you arrive more than 10 minutes late for class, you will be marked as absent.** If a student must miss a class, you will inform me **before** class begins by email or text as soon as you know you won't be able to make it and provide the reason for it to be considered as an excused absence. If you cannot attend class for any reason, you are expected to make up the assignments and readings. (Keep in mind that missed lectures, class discussions and guest speakers — and we will have several speaking to the class during the semester — can't be made up; you simply lose out on those sessions if you are not present.)
- **Because this hybrid class meets only once a week, the mid-week assignments take the place of the second class. The mid-week assignments are generally due the following Tuesday after the assignment is made on Friday. Failure to complete mid-week assignments will count as unexcused absences. You are permitted only two absences during the semester; each additional absence will reduce your final grade by one grade, i.e., and earned B becomes a B minus with a third absence and a C plus with a fourth absence.**
- You may not text, email, tweet, IM or surf the web during class (unless it's for a class assignment). If there's an emergency, please leave the classroom to deal with it. Laptops and smartphones may be used during class only for taking notes.
- Class sessions are “off-the-record.” No tweeting, Facebooking, blogging or audio or visual recording of class activities or discussions is permitted.
- Some of my communication with you will take place through Blackboard and it is essential that you check your Baruch email on a daily basis. I use Blackboard regularly to send important group emails to the class and you miss those at your own peril. Blackboard group emails work only with CUNY email addresses; you will not receive the group emails unless you are checking your CUNY email address.
- **All assignments must be completed by deadline.** That's good training for the news business (and other professions) and we've got a lot of material to cover so it's vital to keep up with the work. (If

there are special circumstances that you think may warrant a deadline extension, please discuss them with me – **before** the deadline has passed.)

Penalties for late assignments: An assignment that misses deadline and is submitted up to a week late will be penalized by an automatic reduction of one full grade, i.e., a B becomes a C; if it is more than one week late, it will be lowered by two full grades, i.e., a B becomes a D. **After two weeks, I will not accept the assignment and you will receive an F grade on it. In this course, an F grade on an assignment equals zero for the purpose of calculating your final course grade.**

IMPORTANT NOTE: You must promptly read and absorb the feedback, editing and critiques that I return to you on submitted assignments, as well as during the in-class Writing Labs. I will not accept the same mistakes being made over and over as we progress through the semester. If you have questions about any of my feedback or grading on a particular assignment, please see me.

- Carefully proofread all your assignments before submission for grammar, style, punctuation, spelling and accuracy. Work that is riddled with careless errors – for instance, names and places misspelled or incorrect information — will be returned ungraded and must be redone and resubmitted to receive credit.
- All assignments must be sent to me by email as attachments. Send only one assignment with each email. If you have two assignments to send at the same time, put them in separate emails. The email subject line must contain the assignment title and date due. For instance, Home assignment/liquor store robbery/Sept. 8.

I will accept assignments only in the .doc format. The first page in the doc should contain, at the top of the page, the story “slug” (the one-word “name” of the story in capital letters, i.e., BIRNBAUMINTERVIEW), your name, date and the word count. Use double-spacing between indented paragraphs. At the bottom of the assignment, type “30” – the traditional journalism marking that signals the end of the story has been reached.

****PLAGIARISM AND FABRICATION**:**

These are the equivalent of felony crimes in academia and journalism. Plagiarism and fabrication will not be tolerated. I will fail you on the assignment and report you to college administrators if I have evidence that you have copied or used someone else’s work without providing appropriate credit, including taking from a previously published story or article, in whole or part, any quotes or any other material for use in your assignment without indicating the source of the information, have made anything up, or have submitted an assignment that was done, in whole or part, by someone else. I will use my own 35 years of experience to uncover cheating, as well as turnitin.com. Also, you are not permitted to submit work for this class that has been or is being submitted for another course.

We will talk about plagiarism and fabrication in the first class, and I will answer any questions you have so that all students are clear on this important issue. You must take academic integrity very seriously; I do. If you have questions about assignments as you are doing them, please ask me.

In addition, visit www.baruch.edu/academic/academic_honesty.html to read the college's policies about academic honesty and send me an email confirming that you understand the principles and will follow them.

CLASS PARTICIPATION AND WRITING LABS:

Active participation is required. Questions, comments and discussion are not only encouraged, they are essential and the basis for part of your grade (see below). Respectful disagreement with your fellow students and/or your professor is invited. And participation is particularly vital during the **Writing Labs** when students will be reading and critiquing each other's work during class so that we can all learn and improve together. During the five Writing Labs throughout the semester, each of which will take up at least half a class if not more, students will receive facts sets and other information that is not in news story form. The students, individually, will digest the information and then write short news stories based on it. We will review some of the work in class, discussing what was done right and what wasn't. The Writing Labs are not graded but are a great opportunity to learn how to report and write news.

CONTACTING ME:

My preferred means of communication is by email. You can reach me at gregg.birnbaum@baruch.cuny.edu, which I check several times day and should be our main point of contact, or at my backup personal email (ggbirnbaum@aol.com) if the Baruch email system is down. You can text me at 917.414.1622 in an emergency. If you need to speak with me for any reason, either by phone or in person, please let me know and I will make time. Each Friday after class during the semester, I am also available in my office, by appointment. Please make use of this opportunity.

GRADING:

Three substantial assignments account for 45 percent of the final grade. They are:

- **"The Meeting,"** Week 4, Sept. 20: Attend a meeting, panel discussion or similar event and write a 500-word story. Discuss with me in advance the event you intend to cover. (10 percent of the final grade; deadline: Friday, Sept. 27)
- **"The Business,"** Week 8, Oct. 18: Write a 650-word story about a business/retail establishment, including interviews with the manager or a store employee, several customers and a competitor. This assignment also has a slideshow component. (15 percent of the final grade; deadline for the story: Friday, Oct. 25; deadline for the slideshow: Friday, Nov. 1.)
- **"The Profile,"** Week 12, Nov. 15: Write a 700-word profile of someone interesting other than a family member or close friend. The story will include an in-depth interview with your subject, as well as

interviews with at least two people who know your subject. (20 percent of the final grade; deadline: Friday, Nov. 22.)

For each of these three major assignments, you must “pitch” (present/sell) your story idea to me as though I were your editor at a newspaper/website. That means convincing me in advance why the story is interesting and worth doing and explaining how you intend to accomplish it.

The remaining 55 percent of the final course grade is composed of:

- Weekly home assignments that are due on Fridays throughout the semester (not including the three major stories discussed above) are worth 20 percent;
- Mid-week assignments count for 15 percent;
- Class participation makes up 15 percent; and
- Surprise quizzes account for the remaining 5 percent.

Most assignments will receive a letter grade, but some non-graded assignments during the semester will be marked as “completed” or “failed to complete.”

IMPORTANT NOTE: I will generally adhere to the syllabus, but I may not follow it precisely every week. I will announce assignments for the coming week in class on Fridays; they will often be what the syllabus indicates, but not always. If you miss a class or are not sure about the assignments for the coming week are, ask me or a fellow student. DO NOT SIMPLY COMPLETE AN ASSIGNMENT BECAUSE IT IS LISTED ON THE SYLLABUS FOR THE COMING WEEK.

There are no mid-terms or final exams for this course and there is no extra-credit opportunity.

Work materials required for various in-class, mid-week and home assignments, such as fact sets, videos and press releases, will be provided to the students.

READINGS:

- There is no textbook. The readings are drawn from a variety of sources and will be distributed in class.
- **Required daily news dosage:** You must read one or more articles each day from major media outlets, such as The New York Times, New York Daily News, The Wall Street Journal, FoxNews.com, CNN.com and NBCNews.com. (If there’s a neighborhood paper or community blog where you live, please read that, too.)

TWITTER:

It’s become a vital part of the news business and will be discussed and used in this course. It is helpful to have a Twitter handle so you can learn how journalists consume news on social media and how they use it to promote their work. If you aren’t already on Twitter, I recommend that you take a few minutes to get there by setting up an account, which is free and easy to do. To get started, some useful news accounts to follow include: @nytimes; @AP; @NBCNews; @CNNbrk; @DRUDGE; and @reuters. There

are literally thousands of others. Find who and what interests you and “follow” it. Consider following your classmates. Closer to home, I also would suggest @BaruchCollege, @DandSmagazine and @BaruchTicker. (If you would like a program to organize your Twitter feed, I recommend TweetDeck.)

MINIMUM TECHNOLOGY REQUIREMENTS:

You will need a reliable internet connection, regular access to a laptop and/or desktop computer, a working knowledge of how to use basic word-processing software and a web browser, an active Baruch email account and access to Blackboard. A smartphone or access to one to record audio and take pictures for assignments also would be helpful. If you don’t have a smartphone, please discuss alternatives with me.

ACCESS:

Students with disabilities may be eligible for a reasonable accommodation to enable them to participate fully in courses at Baruch. If you feel you may be in need of an accommodation, please contact the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities at 646.312.4590.

COURSE OUTLINE: 14 WEEKS

WEEK 1: FRIDAY, AUGUST 30

Topic: Welcome/Introductions/What is news?

Key points covered in class:

- Introductions/Course learning goals/Syllabus review
- Class rules, including plagiarism-fabrication, grading and instructor expectations
- What is news? (and what isn’t)/Definitions, types/Reporters and curiosity/Thinking about the reader, always
- Dog bites man — and the other way around

Mid-week assignment: Write a 300-word essay about your interest in journalism and what you hope to get out of this course. Deadline: Tuesday, Sept. 3, 5 p.m.

Home assignment: Choose the best lede in each of five multiple-choice examples and briefly explain your reason for each selection. Deadline: Friday, Sept. 6, 5 p.m.

Reading assignment:

- *“Inside Reporting,”* Tim Harrower on “The five W’s”
- The Society of Professional Journalists “Code of Ethics”:
<http://www.spj.org/pdf/ethicscode.pdf>

WEEK 2: FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 6

Topic: Leads (“ledes”)/Ethics

Grammar/style corner: Punctuating quotes

Key points covered in class:

- What is a lede?/The five “W’s”/Inverted pyramid/Elements of strong ledes/What can go wrong: The buried lede and other no-no’s
- Case study: Early, later ledes on the Denver Post’s Aurora mass shooting main bar
- Ethics: Lecture and discussion of the SPJ code
Standards/Fairness/Objectivity/Accuracy/Unacceptable conduct
- How the media rights its wrongs with corrections-clarifications, editors’ notes

Mid-week assignment: What’s wrong with eight ledes. Deadline: Tuesday, Sept. 10, 5 p.m.

Home assignment: Write the lede and a half dozen additional paragraphs for a 350-word spot news story based on a fact set about a liquor store robbery. Deadline: Friday, Sept. 13, 5 p.m.

Reading assignment:

- Harrower on “The inverted pyramid” and “Writing basic news leads”

To prepare for “The Meeting**” assignment in Week 4, students need to find an upcoming meeting, speech, panel discussion or similar event to cover. Students will discuss with me in advance the meeting they have selected.

WEEK 3: FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 13

Topic: Interviewing/Writing Lab #1

Key points covered in class:

- Interviewing: What makes for a good interview/How-to, effective methods, finding your comfort zone, technical aspects/What not to do/Dealing with people who don’t want to talk to you
- Discussion of “choose the best ledes” assignment from Week 1 and what’s wrong with eight ledes assignment from Week 2
- Writing Lab #1

Mid-week assignment: Writing Lab redo. Deadline: Tuesday, Sept. 17, 5 p.m.

Home assignment: Interview a half-dozen strangers about a current event and write a 400-word “reaction” story based on those interviews. Students will discuss their topic with me in advance and where they plan to conduct the interviews. Deadline: Friday, Sept. 20, 5 p.m.

Students need to finalize plans for “The Meeting**” assignment in Week 4 by finding an upcoming meeting, speech, panel discussion or similar event to cover. Students will discuss with me in advance the meeting they have selected.

Reading assignment:

- Harrower on “Interviewing” and “Ledes that succeed”
- Highlights of Associated Press style

WEEK 4: FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 20

Topic: Covering a meeting/Story structure/“Fake news”

Grammar/Style corner: It’s, Its

Key points covered in class:

- What comes after the lede/Ways stories can be organized/How ledes are supported/“Nut grafs”
- Lecture: Covering a meeting, speech, panel
- Discussion of the liquor store robbery home assignment from Week 2
- What is “fake news”?/Where does it come from, why is it dangerous, how can it be spotted?/Examples, including fake stories about the Pope

Home assignment: “The Meeting.” Attend a meeting, speech, panel discussion or similar event and write a 500-word story. Students will discuss with me in advance the meeting they plan to cover. Deadline: Friday, Sept. 27, 5 p.m. (Reminder: This assignment counts for 10 percent of your course grade.)

Reading assignment:

- Harrower on “Covering meetings”

WEEK 5: FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 27

Topic: Using quotes/Writing Lab #2

Grammar/style corner: Numbers

Key points covered in class:

- Quotes: Why quotes matter/Recognizing good ones/How to use quotes effectively, when to paraphrase/"Kickers"/Red flags – accusations, inappropriate language, context, precision
- Review "The Interview" assignment from Week 3, including discussion of any difficulties with interview subjects
- Writing Lab #2

Midweek assignment: Writing Lab redo. Deadline: Tuesday, Oct. 1, 5 p.m.

Home assignment: Write a 400-word news story based on President Donald Trump's interaction with CNN White House correspondent Jim Acosta at a press conference. The story will include a hard news lede, relevant quotes, description. VIDEO HERE: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdFe-LmFRV8> (first five minutes only.) Deadline: Friday, Oct. 4, 5 p.m.

Reading assignment:

- Harrower on "Finding and using sources"

WEEK 6: FRIDAY, OCTOBER 4

Topic: Open Meetings Law/Story structure, con't/Sourcing

Key points covered in class:

- Key aspects of New York's Open Meetings Law
- Analysis of the Associated Press story, "Thousands gather on Capitol steps for animal rights"
- Lecture: Sourcing
- Review "best of" examples from "**The Meeting**" assignment from Week 4

Home assignment: Rewrite the Associated Press "late package" story to use quotes and paraphrase properly. Deadline: Friday, Oct. 11, 5 p.m.

Students need to begin the process of finding an appropriate store/retailer for "The Business**" assignment in Week 8. The store should be locally owned and relatively small; no large chains like Starbucks. The story must include interviews with a manager or employee, several customers and possibly a competitor. This assignment includes a slideshow. Students will discuss in advance with me the business they want to write about.

Reading assignment:

- Harrower on "Covering a beat"

WEEK 7: FRIDAY, OCTOBER 11

Topic: Beat reporting/Writing Lab #3/Semester halfway point update

Grammar/style corner: Commas

Key points covered in class:

- What is a beat?/Examples of core beats, governmental and non-governmental/How a beat reporter does it/Types of stories/Words of caution
- Writing Lab #3

Mid-week assignment: Writing Lab redo the in-class writing drill. Deadline: Tuesday, Oct. 15, 5 p.m.

Home assignment: Students will write a 400-word story based on the transcript of a school board meeting. Deadline: Friday, Oct. 18, 5 p.m.

Students need to lock in an appropriate store/retailer for **“The Business” assignment in Week 8. The store should be locally owned and relatively small; no large chains like Starbucks. The story must include interviews with a manager or employee, several customers and possibly a competitor. This assignment includes a slideshow. Students will discuss with me in advance the business they want to write about.

Reading assignment:

- Harrower on “Covering politics”

WEEK 8: FRIDAY, OCTOBER 18

Topic: Beat reporting, con’t/Web analytics/Digital journalism concepts, vocabulary

Key points covered in class:

- Lecture: Beat reporting, cont’d
- Analysis of a New York Times story on Supreme Court affirmative action case
- Understanding reader behavior: Web analytics-metrics/Chartbeat
- Speaking internet journalism: Unique visitors; page views; CMS; SEO; UGC, UX/UE, AMP, engagement time; loyalty; linking

Home assignment: “The Business.” Write a 650-word feature about a small, locally owned store/retail establishment. Tell the reader something new and/or interesting about the business. In particular, readers want to know if the business is growing, stable or sliding downhill. And what are the challenges it faces? What changes, improvements, innovations are planned? The story must include quotes from the owner/manager/employees, several customers and possibly a competitor. This assignment includes a slideshow. Students will discuss with me in advance the business they have selected. Deadline for the

story: Friday, Oct. 25, 5 p.m. Deadline for the slideshow: Friday, Nov. 1, 5 p.m. (Reminder: This assignment counts for 15 percent of your grade. The story and slideshow are one combined grade.)

Reading:

- Harrower on “66 news writing tips”

WEEK 9: FRIDAY, OCTOBER 25

Topic: School board assignment review/Writing Lab #4

Key points covered in class:

- Review the Week 7 home assignment on the school board meeting
- Writing Lab #4

Mid-week assignment: Writing Lab redo. Deadline: Tuesday, Oct. 29, 5 p.m.

Home assignment: Make choices in three journalistic ethics cases and explain your reasoning in two-three sentences for each. **Special deadline: Thursday, Oct. 31, 5 p.m.**

Students also need to start considering a subject for “The Profile**” story in Week 12. Students will discuss their selection with me in advance.

Reading assignment:

- Harrower on “Journalism and social media”
- “10 ways journalists can use Twitter before, during and after a story”:
<http://www.poynter.org/how-tos/digital-strategies/146345/10-ways-journalists-can-use-twitter-before-during-and-after-reporting-a-story/>

WEEK 10: FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 1

Topic: Features, profiles

Key points covered in class:

- Discuss “best of” examples from “**The Business**” assignment from Week 8
- Features lecture: What are features, how do they differ from hard news stories/Various types, including profiles, human interest, trends, explainers/What is a “feature lede”/Use of description, quotes, anecdotes, detail and feature story structure
- Writing profiles: Examples, tips/Analysis of “New Orleans Finest”
- Discuss three ethics cases from Week 9

Home assignment: Write a 300-word story based on a fact set about a good Samaritan who returns a large amount of lost money. Deadline: Friday, Nov. 8, 5 p.m.

Students must finalize their subject and arrangements for “The Profile**” story in Week 12. Students will discuss their selection with me in advance.

Reading assignment:

- Harrower on “Features”

WEEK 11: FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 8

Topic: Fact-checking/Social media/Obituaries

Grammar/style corner: There/They’re/Their

Key points covered in class:

- Fact-checking: Who does it, why/How it works/Examples: The Washington Post’s “Pinocchios,” Politifact
- Social media lecture: Trump and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on Twitter/How newsmakers are employing Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and other social media platforms/Memes, news that goes viral/How reporters can use social media to promote their work, find stories and sources and engage readers/Don’t get fooled: The pitfalls of social media and why journalists should be cautious
- Obits: Structure, style/Telling details from a life/Sensitive issues/Memorable obituaries

Home assignment: Read “Words of the Dying CHCH TV and Constable Garrett Styles” and explain in 250 words whether you would have chosen to broadcast the constable’s last words. **Special deadline: Thursday, Nov. 14, 5 p.m.**

Reading assignment:

- Harrower on “Taste and Decency”

WEEK 12: FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 15

Topic: Profiles, features, con’t/Writing Lab #5

Grammar/style corner: Who, whom

Key points covered in class:

- Features: Analyze several stories with a focus on anecdotal ledes and nut grafs/Examples from The New York Times, the Washington Post and Newsweek
- Discussion of “Dying Constable”
- Writing Lab #5

Midweek assignment: Writing Lab redo. Deadline: Tuesday, Nov. 19, 5 p.m.

Home assignment: “The Profile.” Write a 700-word profile of someone other than a family member or friend. Focus on a couple of the most significant events in your subject’s life to find an angle for your story. This is not a Wiki bio. You should arrange to spend at least one hour with your subject, if not longer. Also, you must interview at least two people who know your subject and quote them in your story. Students will discuss their subject with me in advance. Deadline: Friday, Nov. 22, 5 p.m. (Reminder: This assignment counts for 20 percent of your grade.)

Reading assignment:

- Harrower on “The seven deadly sins”

WEEK 13: FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 22

Topic: Thinking like a journalist/Tabloids

Grammar/style corner: Whose, who’s

Key points covered in class:

- Lecture: Thinking like a journalist
- What is “tabloid journalism”?/New York Post “Doomed” wood (front page)
- Libel lecture: The First Amendment/What is libel/NYT v. Sullivan/Case studies
- News on Snapchat: NBC’s “Stay Tuned”/News Now, OTT

Home assignment: Read the “Find the holes” class handout. Essential information is missing from each of the five stories (creating a large “hole” in the story). Describe the single piece of vital information that’s been left out in one or two sentences for each of the stories. **Deadline: Thursday, Dec. 5, 5 p.m.**

****SCHEDULING NOTE: WE DO NOT MEET NEXT FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 29. COLLEGE IS CLOSED. WE WILL MEET AGAIN ON FRIDAY, DECEMBER 6, FOR OUR LAST CLASS OF THE SEMESTER.**

WEEK 14: FRIDAY, DECEMBER 6

Topic: Movie hour/The End

Key points covered in class:

- Discuss “Best of Profiles”
- Review “Find the Holes”
- Movie hour: Documentary on The New York Times, “The Fourth Estate,” Part 2, “The Trump Bump”
- Endgame: Course closing remarks/Final housekeeping/Goodbyes...