

JOU 3110: Applied Fact Finding

Fall semester 2024, University of Florida

F | Period 4 - 6 (10:40 AM - 1:40 PM)

Final (in class): Nov. 22, 2024 at 10:40 AM (in class)

Instructors:

Kathleen McGrory (727) 580-4614

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Virtual office hours: Friday 8:40 AM - 10:40 AM

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Virtual office hours: Friday 8:40 AM - 10:40 AM

OBJECTIVE

You will learn methods for gathering and analyzing public records used by practicing journalists. You will walk away with an understanding of the importance of public records for backgrounding people and businesses and for uncovering information that cannot be found through interviews. You will get practical experience uncovering those records and using them to generate story ideas.

Over the course of the semester, you will apply this knowledge in a series of nine in-class assignments, seven quizzes and a final exam. Those elements plus nine homework assignments will make up your grade.

CLASS FORMAT AND REQUIREMENTS

We are offering this section of Applied Fact Finding this semester as an online course. Our classes will be held over Zoom. Sessions will be synchronous. They will start promptly at 10:40 a.m. **You are expected to have your camera on during Zoom sessions.** You are encouraged to use virtual backgrounds for Zoom if you want to protect the privacy of your surroundings. If you have extenuating circumstances or concerns about Zoom attendance, please let us know immediately.

ATTENDANCE AND RULES OF THE ROAD

Class attendance is mandatory and, because there is no textbook requirement in this course, critical to understanding the concepts. The material covered on the quizzes and final can only be learned by attending class regularly. Log in on time and ready to learn.

If you miss class, it is YOUR RESPONSIBILITY to obtain material missed through other students.

Make-up assignments, quizzes and exams are not permitted. However, if you have an excused absence (due to illness, emergency, special curricular requirements, etc.) AND notify the instructors in advance, an exception may be made. Requirements for class attendance and make-up exams, assignments and other work in this course are consistent with university policies that can be found here: <https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/attendance.aspx>.

Discussions in class may include information about stories in progress. Students will be asked at the beginning of the course to agree to keep all class conversations off the record. Students should not Tweet or share information from class on Facebook, X or other forms of social media.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENTS

You will be required to complete nine homework assignments. Each assignment will entail reading one or more news stories and responding to a writing prompt. Aim for about 250 words total. You'll submit the assignments through Canvas by 11:59 p.m. the day before class.

GRADE CALCULATION: 1,000 points total

Quizzes: 350 points

There are seven quizzes worth 50 points each. (Note: You must attend class to obtain these points.)

Homework assignments: 225 points

There are nine homework assignments worth 25 points each.

In-class assignments: 225 points

There are nine in-class assignments worth 25 points each. (Note: You must attend class to obtain these points.)

Final exam: 200 points

OUR GRADING SCALE

A = 94-100
A- = 90-93
B+ = 87-89
B = 83-86
B- = 80-82
C+ = 75-79
C = 70-74
C- = 67-69
D+ = 63-66
D = 60-63
D- = 55-59
F = 54 or below

NOTE: The journalism school requires a minimum grade of a C in this course. If you end the semester with fewer than 700 of 1,000 points, you may have to retake it.

CLASS SCHEDULE

August 23, 2024

Instructors: Kat and Mike

Topic: We'll get to know each other and explain how this class works.

Due next class: READ: [Securing public records in Florida can take cash, patience and lawyers](#); [Tampa fire chief ordered police called on a local journalist asking for records](#); [Florida judge orders DeSantis to turn over records on migrant flights to Martha's Vineyard](#)
RESPOND: Based on the assigned readings and your own knowledge or research, what are some of the opportunities and challenges Florida reporters face when it comes to obtaining public records? (Aim for about 250 words.)

August 30, 2024

Instructor: Kat

Topic: Kat will give you an overview on public records. You'll learn about some of the obstacles you might encounter and how the state public records law can be your friend. We'll practice submitting a records request ([ICA #1](#)).

Due next class: READ: [For Cops, No Limit](#). RESPOND: How did the reporters use public records to execute this piece? (Be specific.) What worked about this story? What do you think could have been done better? (Aim for about 250 words total.)

Sept. 6, 2024

Instructor: Kat

Topic: [Quiz #1](#). Kat will teach you the records reporters use on the crime beat, including calls for service, incident reports, arrest affidavits, jail bookings and autopsy reports. We'll practice reading and interpreting some of these reports ([ICA #2](#)).

Due next class: READ: [Storm the Capitol](#). RESPOND: How did the reporters use public records to execute this piece? (Be specific.) What worked about this story? What do you think could have been done better? (Aim for about 250 words total.)

Sept. 13, 2024

Instructor: Mike

Topic: [Quiz #2](#). Mike will give you a primer on the criminal, civil and administrative sides of state court as well as the civil and criminal sides of federal court. Then, he'll show you how to use court records to break news. We'll practice searching for and accessing those records online ([ICA #3](#)).

Due next class: READ: [Clear Takeover](#). RESPOND: How did the reporters use public records to execute this piece? (Be specific.) What worked about this story? What do you think could have been done better? (Aim for about 250 words total.)

Sept. 20, 2024

Instructor: Kat

Topic: [Quiz #3](#). Kat will teach you the basics of official records, which include property deeds, marriage licenses, lien filings and court judgments. You will practice using those records to background people ([ICA #4](#)).

Due next class: READ: [‘That’s ... ridiculous.’](#) RESPOND: How did the reporters use public records to execute this piece? (Be specific.) What worked about this story? What do you think could have been done better? (Aim for about 250 words total.)

Sept. 27, 2024

Instructor: Mike

Topic: [Quiz #4](#). Mike will show you how to locate and read state business filings for privately held companies. You’ll learn how to use these records as a reporting tool regardless of whether you cover business. You’ll also learn the basics of locating and reading Forms 990 for nonprofits. ([ICA #5](#))

Due next class: READ: [Failure Factories](#) RESPOND: How did the reporters use public records to execute this piece? (Be specific.) What worked about this story? What do you think could have been done better? (Aim for about 250 words total.)

Oct. 4, 2024

Instructor: Kat

Topic: [Quiz #5](#). Kat will give you an introduction to the various records you can use on the education and local government beats. You’ll practice digging into those records and using them to pitch stories ([ICA #6](#)).

Due next class: READ: [A Florida nursing home lost its Medicare benefits. Residents lost a home.](#) RESPOND: How did the reporters use public records to execute this piece? (Be specific.) What worked about this story? What do you think could have been done better? (Aim for about 250 words total.)

Oct. 11, 2024

Instructor: Mike

Topic: [Quiz #6](#). Mike will show you how to use licensing and regulatory records to reveal information about doctors, teachers and other professionals. Then, you’ll practice using the state’s online regulators databases ([ICA #7](#)).

Due next class: READ: TBA RESPOND: How did the reporters use records to execute this piece? (Note that some of these records may not be public records, but rather private records. Also, be specific.) What worked about this story? What do you think could have been done better? (Aim for about 250 words total.)

Oct. 18, 2024

NO CLASS. HOMECOMING

Oct. 25, 2024

Instructor: Mike

Topic: Quiz #7. We'll discuss a few other types of records we haven't covered. After that, Mike will give you a hypothetical scenario and you'll brainstorm what records you would need to report on it (ICA #8).

Due next class: READ: TBA RESPOND: How did the reporters use public records to execute this piece? (Be specific.) What worked about this story? What do you think could have been done better? (Aim for about 250 words total.)

Nov. 1, 2024

Instructor: Kat

Topic: A well-rounded story is more than just records. Kat and a guest journalist will talk about marrying public records with traditional shoe-leather reporting. Then they'll take you behind the scenes of a story. (ICA #9)

Due next class: Nothing.

Nov. 8, 2024

NO CLASS.

Nov. 15, 2024

Instructor: Kat and Mike

Topic: We'll review everything we learned this semester, answer any last questions you have and help you get ready for the final exam.

Due next class: Nothing.

Nov. 22, 2024

Instructors: Kat and Mike

We'll all log onto Zoom and complete the final during our regularly scheduled class block.

GRADING POLICIES

<https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/grades.aspx>

ACCOMMODATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities requesting accommodations should first register with the Disability Resource Center (352-392-8565, www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/) by providing appropriate documentation. Once registered, students will receive an accommodation letter which must be presented to the instructors when requesting accommodation. Students with disabilities should follow this procedure as early as possible in the semester.

DIVERSITY STATEMENT

The University of Florida's College of Journalism and Communications Department of Journalism embraces a commitment toward an intellectual community enriched and enhanced by diversity along a number of dimensions, including race, ethnicity and national origins, gender and gender identity, sexuality, class and religion. We expect each of our journalism courses to help foster an understanding of the diversity of peoples and cultures and of the significance and impact of mass communications in a global society.

Your instructors are committed to making sure all students feel respected and comfortable in this class. If you have a name and/or set of pronouns that differ from those that appear in your official records, please let us know. We also welcome your feedback on ways we can improve the effectiveness of the course for you personally, or for other students or student groups.

ONLINE COURSE EVALUATION

Students are expected to provide feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing online evaluations at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu>. Evaluations are typically open during the last two or three weeks of the semester, but students will be given specific times when they are open. Summary results of these assessments are available to students at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu/results/>.

HONESTY POLICY

UF students are bound by The Honor Pledge which states, "We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honor and integrity by abiding by the Honor Code." On all work submitted for credit by students at the University of Florida, the following pledge is either required or implied: "On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment." The Honor Code (<https://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/process/student-conduct-honor-code/>) specifies a number of behaviors that are in violation of this code and the possible sanctions. Please note that you may not turn in work generated by Chat GPT and other AI programs. Furthermore, you are obligated to report any condition that facilitates academic misconduct to appropriate personnel. If you have any questions or concerns, please consult with the instructors in this class.

ADDITIONAL CONTACTS

Contact information for the Counseling and Wellness Center:

<http://www.counseling.ufl.edu/cwc/Default.aspx>, 392-1575; and the University Police Department: 392-1111 or 9-1-1 for emergencies.