

# J304 media writing

SPRING SEMESTER 2016 :: ERIC THOMAS, instructor :: U of KANSAS

*in reporting the news, we might seek to answer*

## WHAT? So WHAT? Now WHAT?

### WHAT?

here are the basics...

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Office Hours: Tuesday 10 to 11 a.m. &

Thursday 8:30 to 10:30 a.m.

Also available by appointment, however I will not often be on campus Monday and Friday.

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will emphasize journalistic writing and the role it plays in coherent and engaging stories. It will build on JOUR 300 and JOUR 302, helping students sharpen their writing and interviewing skills for the Web, for print and for broadcast; and sharpen their judgment in choosing information, sources and story forms. Passage of the School's Grammar Basic and subsequent proctored grammar exam is required before enrolling in this course.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** this course must be completed with a C (2.0) or better in order to move on in the journalism curriculum

### WHAT? SO WHAT? NOW WHAT?

I listen to a lot of news on National Public Radio and their many news programs. I like their writing because it is smart, gives me lots of context and fills up my drives to Lawrence and carpooling trips with my kids.

The other reason that I like their writing is because its structure is sturdy. Many reporters for NPR will write with a form they call, "What? So what? Now what?" And it works, both for their news reporting and for my syllabus.

First, the reporter will answer the basic facts of the situation: what we call the 5Ws and 1H. As objective as they can be, they report the essential information. Next, is the "So what?" Because a listener may never have heard about this news, or might only know the basics, the reporter will supply context and explain why this topic is newsworthy by inter-



**25 December 2000 ::** Flabbergasted by the giving, Mariah Flores, 6, listens to a CD player while sitting on bike, both of which were donated by people who read her father's letter to the editor asking for help with Christmas. The single letter published in the local newspaper on Christmas day described the hard times the Flores family was experiencing and inspired dozens of families to arrive at the Flores family home Christmas morning with more gifts than the family could fit in its home. Mariah's mother Kristi, in the background, was overwhelmed by the gifts that kept arriving at the family's front door. **ERIC THOMAS PHOTO**

viewing authoritative sources. And finally, the reporter takes us to “Now what?” by providing the important or expected next steps in the story.

This class will deal teach you to write nimbly using that structure and others. Indeed, I am using it as the structure for the syllabus in your hands right now.

## COURSE RATIONALE

For most students, media writing is an introduction of new writing skills. Our schools — almost since the first day of kindergarten — repeat and celebrate the writing skills that are almost in opposition to media writing.

For instance, how many essays for literature class have you written with a central thesis representing your point of view? Or, how many personal narrative essays did you write in applying for college that were dotted with the word “I”? Or, how many historical papers did you write that relied on books or articles written by someone you had never met. While these are useful skills, we need to strengthen other skills to make you a great media writer.

During those years of writing personal narratives, literature essays and history papers, you were writing. But not in the way this class encourages and demands.

Instead of your impression, we will focus on verifiable facts. Instead of telling your personal story we will work to tell a story of wide consequence. Instead of writing about the ancient and remote, we will write about the local and immediate. This class will ask you to trade in the [Great Gatsby](#) essay from junior year of high

school, the summer memoir from fifth grade and the history essay on the Incas.

In return, you get news. Indeed, you will give me, your instructor, the news. You will give your readers the news.

So, with this transition away from your old ways and your old forms comes a change in habits and a growth in skills. You will learn how to write more concisely, research more locally and structure with more urgency. The goal of this class is to make your words more energetic and more important than they have even been.

So, let’s get to it.

## GOALS

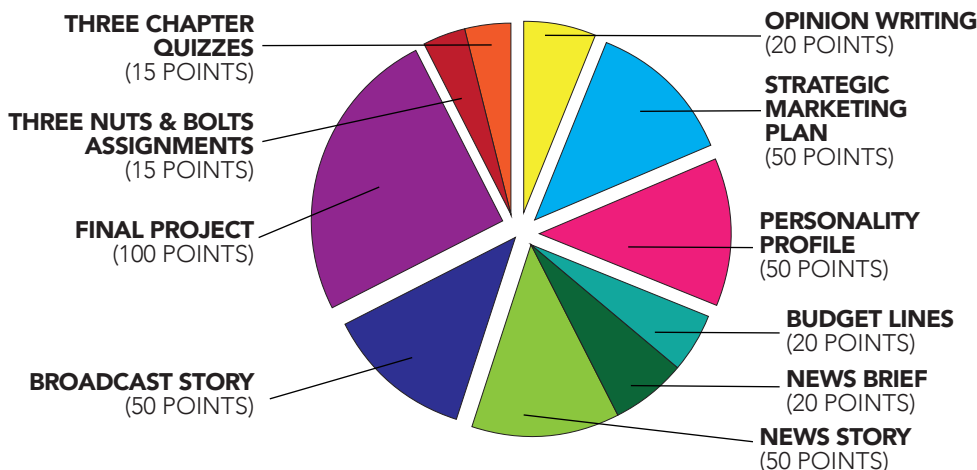
- Write clear and accurate stories using correct grammar, punctuation and syntax.
- Develop storytelling skills for mass media and strategic communication.
- Develop news judgment and prepare messages targeted for appropriate audiences.
- Observe, interview, gather research and understand how to verify information.
- Write effective, concise leads and logically organized news and feature stories.
- Know when information must be attributed to a source to avoid editorializing.
- Use basic Associated-Press style in print stories and public relations documents.

- Think critically and independently, keeping objectivity in mind.
- Make pictures and words work together to tell a story.
- Understand the concepts supporting strategic communication messages.

## MATERIALS/RESOURCES

- *Inside Reporting* by Tim Harrower. Book can be purchased online and at the KU bookstore. This is a required text. The book is lively, funny and current, plus it has great examples of writing in the back of the book called “The Morgue.”
- Selected readings assigned on Blackboard
- Please be sure to bring a note-taking materials (of your choosing), some non-black pens (used for editing and revision) and paper on which to write. You should have these basics each day in class.
- Blackboard will be used for this class for most functions: keeping in touch through email blasts, tallying up your grade as the semester progresses, assignment descriptions and other documents.
- To post finished stories and begin creating a portfolio, you will construct an online portfolio using the Wordpress content management system. The journalism school has documentation and videos to help navigate you through the process. The journalism school will also host your website, which will save you time and money.
- For this class we will use Google Drive extensively. Google Drive allows you create and share documents in real time with one another and for submission to me. This service simply requires a Google sign on and password. You likely already have one through your logins to Gmail, Youtube, Picasa or another part of Google’s empire. Some of the documents will be private between you and me but others will be shared with the entire class. If you ever have a hesitation about sharing your work with the class at large, please let me know. While collaboration and group revision will be an important part of

## DISTRIBUTION OF ASSIGNMENTS OVER 400 TOTAL POINTS FOR THE SEMESTER



# J304

## MEDIA WRITING STUDENT CONTRACT

After reviewing this syllabus, please sign below.

In signing and submitting the syllabus, you acknowledge all of the policies, both of this class in particular and the school of journalism more widely.

You also acknowledge that you understand the requirements of the course, in terms of materials, supplies and assignments.

Finally, you agree to simply work hard to create original work that helps you to grow as a visual person.

**Please sign below and date.**

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signature

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your printed name

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date

*Please return to class on the second day of the course.*

the class, we can work to respect your need for privacy.

- Lisa McLendon runs The Bremner Editing Center in the journalism school, on the first floor of Stauffer-Flint Hall. This is a resource for your writing and editing needs. You pay for their editing services in your course fees each semester, so take advantage of the fact that she's a professional who can boost your grade by helping you clean up your writing. The Bremner Center is available during posted hours (on the office door). You can also email Lisa at [lisamclendon@ku.edu](mailto:lisamclendon@ku.edu) for an appointment.

**From their website:** The Bremner Center offers one-on-one editing assistance for students in the School of Journalism. You may walk in or make an appointment. Appointments are not necessary but people with appointments take priority over walk-ins.

**Here's how it works: You:** Bring in a paper copy of a finished draft of your assignment, along with your professor's instructions for the assignment.

**The Bremner Center:** Will carefully edit your writing with you, explaining where and why changes should be made, and giving you extra information or practice in areas you're having trouble with. Our focus is the clarity, accuracy and correctness of language – you are responsible for your content.

Yes, we will help you with assignments outside of the J-School.

Yes, we will help you proofread your resume or cover letter.

Yes, we will help you get better at punctuation, grammar, usage, structure and clarity.

No, we will not write your assignment for you. You must be finished with a draft before you come to the Center.

No, we will not edit things for you that you drop off or email. You must come to the Center and work with us in person if you want help.

## SO WHAT?

**this is why it matters...**

### IN-CLASS WORK

**Lectures** will expand on readings. You will want to take good notes that go beyond the main points of slides. I expect that you demonstrate understanding of the material from the lectures when completing your writing assignments and quizzes.

**Writing groups** will be central to our work in this class. During many class periods you will gather in writing groups to discuss the current writing assignment. During writing groups early in the semester, I will provide the structure and talking points for those groups. Later in the semester I will allow you as group members to work in ways you see as best. Regardless, it is important to know that your writing will be shared with others in the class in addition to me. Likewise, you should know that coming to class without work or with incomplete work will be obvious to your writing group in addition to me as your instructor.

Perhaps the second hardest thing to do in a writing group (besides opening yourself to an audience by sharing your own writing) is to give honest feedback about the writing of others. Very few writers who care enough to be in journalism school want bland feedback of their writing. No one wants to hear, "It's good" followed by silence and a smile.

Good writers want rigorous, honest and thoughtful commentary on their writing. Please remember that you aren't being a kind member of the writing group if you simply parcel out bland niceties. Instead, please be the kind of editor and writing group member that you would want for your writing.

**Revision.** It would be surprising to me if this doesn't happen this semester to each student in this class. Here's the situation: you will work earnestly and hard at an assignment by researching or writing or editing or interviewing. After that work, you will hear criticism about your writing. That criticism might come from me, your classmates or even yourself.

Perhaps the feedback will be about the style, the structure, the lead or even the topic itself. At that moment, you might realize that, “Yes, this story needs to be changed.” Or even more drastically: “This story isn’t working at all.”

This moment is potentially the most courageous moment in writing. It’s even more courageous in some ways than choosing a difficult, controversial or taboo story topic. This is the moment where you decide to revise: either by making small changes or completely starting over.

Revision is tough and courageous work, partly because it involves redoing what you have already done. And also because revision involves listening to your readers’ feedback and allowing it to trump your beliefs about your own work.

My hope is that when you are faced with this fork in the road — with one road involving courageous revision and the other leading to the same meek approach — you will be tough and energetic.

And you will revise.

## ASSESSMENT

Learning outcomes in this class will be evaluated through writing assignments, pop quizzes, writing exercises and a final project.

## ASSIGNMENTS:

- **Opinion Writing.** For the first assignment of the class we will ease into writing at a place you are likely most comfortable: by displaying your opinion. A common skill developed in young writers is the ability to make an argument with supporting evidence. For this assignment we will enrich this skill with special attention to audience and writing with concision. The one media writing twist that we will put on this: you will give us your opinion on something newsworthy and current. (20 points)
- **Strategic Marketing Plan.** This assignment provides a preview of what it is like to work for a marketing client and develop a strategy for how the world sees that client. You will be provided a client and work to document their current state of business and

how they should represent themselves in the future. (50 points)

- **Personality Profile.** Writing any of the stories that we will craft later in the semester will demand good interviewing habits, we will write a profile of the newsworthy person. Each student will select his/her own person. Using interviews of that person (along with other people who know that person) you will craft a story explaining what makes them interesting, newsworthy and complicated. (50 points)
- **Budget Lines.** This may be a new phrase to you. “Budget lines” are basically story ideas, but written in a way to convince your editors that the story is important and to explain the key questions about the topic. For the assignment, you will pitch a variety of story ideas that you could cover in the coming weeks. We then will submit two final selections: one that you will use for a news brief and another that you will use as the basis for a news story. You will find descriptions for both of those assignments below. (20 points)
- **News Brief.** Not every story demands 500 words and a variety of interviews. If the news is simple, factual and without complication, the reader will simply want a brief. For this assignment you will write a brief about the topic you chose during the budget line assignment. (25 points)
- **News Story.** Using the story idea you crafted in the budget line assignment, you will write a full-length news story of the type that you would find online or in a newspaper covering a timely and local event or issue. This story will rely on multiple sources and be written according to the many journalistic writing practices that we will have covered by this time. (50 points)
- **Broadcast Story.** Writing for broadcast has different style, structure and voice from a news story. We will write a brief broadcast story, accompanied by video to give you some practice. (50 points)
- **Final Project.** The final project in this class will display many of the skills that

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## WRITING SPACE

On the other side of this piece of paper is your contract, so I couldn’t print any important stuff here. But that doesn’t mean that you can’t write a haiku about your summer break. Or, a sonnet about the dreamy person you met the other day. Or, some other kind of whimsical wordcraft. Enjoy.

you have started or refined during this class. You will write a story that covers a local and timely issue: likely something of more complexity than the news story. While feature writing will be reviewed and read in preparation, this story will be more of a blend of news and feature rather than a straight feature story. This project will be due during the final exam time for this class and will substitute for a final exam. (100 points)

- **Pop Quizzes.** From Tim Harrower's book "Inside Reporting" we will read six chapters. During three unannounced class periods I will provide pop quizzes over those chapters. You will not know in advance of the reading whether there will be quizzes. I do not give make-up quizzes without a verifiable excuse. (5 points each: about 15 points total)
- **Nuts & Bolts.** Throughout the semester I will provide "Nuts & Bolts" exercises to sharpen your use of punctuation, AP Style, grammar, editorializing, etc. Of these assignments, I will collect three and grade them for both completion and correctness. (5 points each: about 15 points total)

**NOTE:** I reserve the right to make changes to the number of assignments, their point value and assignment descriptions. (In other words, stay tuned and stay flexible.)

## NOW WHAT?

and now, here is what to do...

### CLASS ETIQUETTE

- For email, please remember that I get a lot of it. Please write "YourName: J304" in the subject line. If you miss class, the responsibility is on you to gather notes. Please don't email me seeking materials you missed.
- Attendance is important in any class, but especially in a small class like this with revision and writing group feedback. In this class, you will be allowed 2 "free" absences. You do NOT have to report the reason for your absence on those days or even let me know you will be missing. Each time you miss class after your two freebies, I

will subtract 2.5 percent from your final grade. Needless to say, this makes a huge difference at the end of the semester on whether you get an A- or a B+ in this class. I will not make any exceptions to this policy to be fair to everyone.

### RULES TO LIVE BY

- All assignments are due at the time listed on the assignment description and the daily schedule of work. Some of the deadlines will be electronic submission outside of class hours. Indeed, some deadlines will be at midnight of a particular day. Please expect technical difficulties and do not wait until the last minute to submit work.
- Assignments turned in after the deadline (yes, this means even a minute or two late) will lose 10 percent credit.
- Assignments not submitted within one hour of the deadline will lose 50 percent credit.
- No assignments will be accepted more than 24 hours late are due without a verifiable excuse.
- If you are absent from class, pop quizzes or other work due on a particular day can only be made up if:
  - a signed physician note (not from Watkins Health Services) documents the absence
  - a KU-sponsored athletic event in which you are participating conflicts with the quiz and you notify me
  - you notify me in advance of the conflict and convince me of its necessity
  - there is a death in your family: If you have a death in your family, you must bring me documentation of the funeral service: a hard copy of a program or an obituary. I will not accept email links to obituaries. It's up to you to print me off some evidence or pick up a program and bring it to me by the next week.

If your absence is not described above, and you miss class (even for a "freebie" day) you will receive zero credit for the work that was due, or

the quiz.

- If you would like to submit an assignment early due to absence, you can submit it at an earlier class, submit it electronically or ask the journalism resource center staff to place it in my mailbox.

### GRADING CRITERIA

#### 92.5 to 100 percent: EXCELLENT (A)

An excellent story accomplishes the following:

- Provides readers with accurate and timely information.
- Has a clear summary focus statement positioned either in a summary lead (or lead-in for broadcast writing) or in a nut graf high in the story or news release.
- Presents a compelling lead that establishes the theme of the story and features new information or an intriguing anecdote or scene.
- Develops the story's theme through exhaustive reporting, research, persuasive examples and compelling quotes from key sources.
- Attributes all information that requires attribution.
- Sustains focus through logical organization and compelling transitions.
- Expresses ideas fluently and precisely, using effective vocabulary and sentence variety
- Demonstrates facility with the conventions (i.e., grammar, usage, and mechanics, and AP style) of journalistic writing, usually manifested in flawless use of the language

#### 87.5 to 92.5 percent: GOOD (B+ to A-)

A good story accomplishes the following:

- Provides readers with accurate and timely information.
- Has a clear summary focus statement positioned either in a summary lead (or lead-in for broadcast writing) or in a nut graf high in the story or news release.
- Presents a compelling lead that establishes the theme of the story and features new information or an intriguing anecdote or scene.
- Develops the story's theme through exhaustive reporting, research,

persuasive examples and compelling quotes from key sources.

- Attributes all information that requires attribution.
- Sustains focus through logical organization and compelling transitions.
- Expresses ideas fluently and precisely, using effective vocabulary and sentence variety.

### **77.5 to 87.5 percent: AVERAGE (C+ to B)**

An average story accomplishes the following:

- Provides readers with accurate information.
- Has a summary focus statement positioned either in a summary lead or in a nut graf.
- Presents a lead that establishes the theme of the story and focuses on new information
- Develops the story's theme through reporting, research, persuasive examples and quotes from key sources.
- Attributes all information that requires attribution.
- Sustains adequate focus through elementary organizational and transitional devices.
- Expresses ideas using adequate vocabulary and sentence variety.
- Demonstrates knowledge of the conventions of journalistic writing, though errors occur.

### **67.5 to 77.5 percent: LIMITED (D+ to C)**

A limited story exhibits the following:

- Provides readers with accurate information that may not be timely
- Has an unclear summary focus statement positioned either in a summary lead or in a nut graf high in the story.
- Presents a lead that does not establish the theme of the story.
- Contains inadequate reporting and research, but can be salvaged with more effort.
- Leaves unattributed a single piece of information that needs attribution.
- Appears to have a vague organizational philosophy.
- Has problems in language and sentence structure that result in a lack of clarity.

- Contains occasional major errors or frequent minor errors in grammar, usage, mechanics, AP style and/or journalistic writing style.

### **59.5 to 67.5 percent: WEAK (D- to D)**

A weak story exhibits the following:

- Provides readers with accurate information that may not be timely.
- Has an unclear summary focus statement positioned either in a summary lead or in a nut graf high in the story.
- Presents a lead that does not establish the theme of the story.
- Contains inadequate reporting and research, but can be salvaged with more effort.
- Leaves unattributed a single piece of information that needs attribution.
- Appears to have a vague organizational philosophy.
- Has problems in language and sentence structure that result in a lack of clarity.
- Contains occasional major errors or frequent minor errors in grammar, usage, mechanics, AP style and/or journalistic writing style.

### **1 to 59.5 percent: FAILING (F)**

A failing story exhibits ONE OR MORE of the following characteristics:

- Provides readers with inaccurate information.
- Appears to contain little "news."
- Appears to have no focus statement or summary lead.
- Provides little or no evidence what sources were used to gather information.
- Exhibits a serious lack of organization.
- Exhibits severe problems in sentence structure that persistently interfere with meaning.
- Contains pervasive errors in grammar, usage, mechanics, journalistic writing style and/or AP style.

## **ORIGINAL WORK**

The expectation when you come to this class is that you've come to learn, to be creative, to stretch your imagination, and expand your skills. Therefore, all the work you do in this class must be original. That

means no "recycling" of assignments or papers from other classes, in the j-school or outside the j-school.

**Don't recycle.** Don't recycle old high school assignments. If you wrote a story for a publication or an earlier class, you cannot revise that slightly and resubmit it as a new assignment in this class. I expect that will be true of all of your writing for this class: that it is original.

Any efforts to recycle material will be regarded as academic dishonesty. You may receive zero credit for the assignment and have a letter entered into your academic file.

## **ABOUT PLAGIARISM**

In general, any student who turns in work that is not their own on any assignment will receive a zero on that assignment. You may also be subject to Journalism School penalties on cheating and plagiarism, which can include expulsion from the School of Journalism.

### **Policy on Plagiarism & Fabrication/Falsification: Adopted May 7, 2004:**

The William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications does not tolerate plagiarism, fabrication of evidence and falsification of evidence.

Penalties for plagiarism, fabrication or falsification can include a failing grade for this course and expulsion from the School of Journalism and Mass Communications.

If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, fabrication or falsification, please consult the instructor of this course.

The following definitions are from Article II, Section 6, of the University Senate Rules and Regulations, revised FY98.

### **Plagiarism**

Knowingly presenting the work of another as one's own (i.e., without proper acknowledgment of the source). The sole exception to the requirement of acknowledging sources is when the information or ideas are common knowledge.

### **Fabrication and Falsification**

Unauthorized alteration or invention of any information or citation in an academic exercise.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

A good working definition of conflict of

interest for those starting media writing is this: writers should avoid reporting on topics, people or issues that they are personally involved in. Writers should strive for independence, which begins by reporting on topics from which the writers are independent.

In this class, avoiding conflict of interest necessarily means avoiding covering

- friends and family members,
- fellow sorority sisters and fraternity brothers,
- the journalism school and its staff,
- any campus groups or clubs that you are involved in
- anywhere you work

However, making an exhaustive bullet-pointed list of each possible conflict of interest is impossible. You will need to be the judge of what stories you can write about with honesty, independence and candor.

This class should enlarge your world by putting you in contact with people who you have never met, issues you have never considered and places you have never been. Embrace that opportunity, rather than falling back to the comfortable and familiar. Reaching into the world will make the writing more interesting and life more fun.

## STUDENT WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

The University of Kansas is committed to helping all students learn. If you have a special need that may affect your learning, please contact me as soon as possible. Please be aware that the KU Office of Student Access Services coordinates accommodations for all students who are eligible. If you have a disability for which you wish to request accommodations and have not contacted this office, please do so as soon as possible.

Information about services can be found at <https://disability.ku.edu/>. Or you can visit the office on the first floor of Strong Hall. The phone number is 785-864-4064. The email is [achieve@ku.edu](mailto:achieve@ku.edu)

Please contact me privately regarding your needs in this course.

## CLASSROOM ATTENDANCE

From the journalism school's policy:

"No student may add a journalism class

after the 20th day of a semester.

"Students must attend their classes and laboratory periods. Instructors may take attendance into account in assessing a student's performance and may require a certain level of attendance for passing a course. Instructors may choose to drop students from a course, based on attendance, without consent.

"The School of Journalism reserves the right to cancel the enrollment of students who fail to attend the first class or laboratory meeting."

"The KU Office of Student Financial Aid is required by federal law to determine whether students who receive aid are attending each class in which they are enrolled. Instructors are required to report to that office absences of students who have stopped attending and names of those who have enrolled but never have attended. Students who do not attend classes may be required to repay federal and/or state financial aid.

"Students who receive any form of financial aid should learn all requirements including minimum hours of enrollment and grades to qualify for and retain that aid."

## INCLEMENT WEATHER AND SPECIAL NEEDS

In the event of inclement weather, the decision to cancel classes is made by KU officials. To determine whether snow or icy conditions have canceled classes, call 864-7669 (864-SNOW).

The Office of Disability Resources (DR), 22 Strong Hall, 785-864-2620 (v/tty), coordinates accommodations and services for KU students with disabilities. If you have a disability for which you may request accommodation in KU classes and have not contacted DR, please do so as soon as possible. Please also contact me privately in regard to this course.

## COPYING OR RECORDING

Course materials prepared by the instructor, as well as content of all lectures presented by the instructor, are the instructor's property. Video and audio recording of lectures without instructor consent is prohibited. On request, the instructor usually will permit students to record lectures, on the condition that these recordings are only used as a study aid by the individual making the

recording. Unless the instructor gives explicit permission, recordings of lectures may not be modified and must not be transferred or transmitted to any other person, whether or not that individual is enrolled in the course.

## GRADING SCALE

The grading scale for this course is shown below. Students' grades within .50 percent of the next highest letter grade will be rounded up to grant the higher letter grade. Grades will not be rounded any more than that.

A = 100-93 // A- = 92-90

B+ = 89-88 // B = 87-83 // B- = 82-80

C+ = 79-78 // C = 77-73 // C- = 72-70

D+ = 69-68 // D = 67-63 // D- = 62-60

F = 59 and below

## FINAL EXAM TIME

The university has scheduled the following time for our final exam: Thursday, May 12 from 1:30 p.m. to 4 p.m. Students are required to attend this time.

## CHANGES TO SYLLABUS

As the instructor of this course, I reserve the right to modify the syllabus and the daily schedule, if necessary. Those changes may include the alteration of point values for specific assignments. Of course, I will notify you in advance if changes are needed.

## THANKS

I appreciate you reading all the way until the end. I am ready for a great semester and to see your inspired writing.

Yours in What, So What and Now What,

