Journalism syllabus  Eng467B

Spring 2016

Instructor:  
Bob Woodward  
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Assistant:  
Evelyn Duffy  
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Class meets: Mondays, 2:30-4:20 p.m. Location to be determined.

Office hours: Please contact Evelyn to arrange half-hour appointments in my office on Mondays and Tuesdays.

Instructor’s Biography

Woodward graduated from Yale in 1965 and is currently an associate editor of The Washington Post where he has worked since 1971. He has shared in two Pulitzer Prizes, first for the Post’s coverage of the Watergate scandal with Carl Bernstein and secondly as the lead reporter for the Post’s coverage of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. He has authored or coauthored 18 books, all of which have been national non-fiction bestsellers. Twelve of those have been #1 national bestsellers, ranging from All the President’s Men (1974) to Obama’s Wars (2010). (See www.bobwoodward.com under “Full Biography” for more details and background.)

Overview

English 467B is a seminar that examines the practices, methods and impact of journalism. The main attention will be on reporting and writing: How others have done it, what works and
what doesn’t. There will be a number of workshops during the seminar sessions to show the students how to improve story drafts and expose the students to best practices in journalism. The course is designed not just for those considering journalism or writing as a career but for anyone hoping to enter a profession in which the validity of new and old information is central to success. That may be almost everyone. Think of the seminar as a class to improve your methods for obtaining, skeptically evaluating and assessing information, and then writing it up for others to read.

Students will read specific articles and books that will be discussed in class and analyzed in occasional short papers.

I will meet or speak by phone frequently with each student individually during the term in order to provide evaluations, assistance on reporting, writing or the final project, and, if sought, career guidance. I will also offer several opportunities throughout the semester for students to gather with me for informal dinners on Monday nights. Since this is only my third year teaching a formal course, it will continue to be a learning experience for me and I hope to get strong feedback from the students as the course proceeds on what is valuable to them—the readings, writing assignments, and class discussion. Some assignments may change based on student reactions and feedback.

Evelyn Duffy, my full-time assistant who has worked on my last four books, will help me with the class. Don’t hesitate to email her (EvelynMDuffy@gmail.com) with any questions or ideas for improvement you may have.

Grades

Profile and short papers:

1/3 of the final grade will be based on a written profile and occasional short papers.

Each student will be assigned to write a 2,000 word profile of another person in the seminar (selected at random by me). These
profiles should be based in large part on interviews with at least 10 people (parents, relatives, friends, and most importantly the person who is the subject of the profile).

Because the class meets only once a week, short papers will at times be due on the Thursday or Saturday prior to class. Please consult the syllabus carefully for due dates.

Large reporting project:

1/3 of the final grade will be based on a large-scale reporting/writing project. An initial outline is due on Friday, March 11 and the final paper is due on Wednesday, May 11.

Each student will undertake and complete a reporting/writing project (3,500 to 4,000 words). It should examine and assess a Yale, city or state government program, a department, local business, or event. Subjects should be cleared with me in advance. Reporting will include interviewing human sources who witnessed or participated in events, visiting the scene of the story if possible, and researching from original documents, newspapers, books and the Internet. (In the past two years, several students’ papers have later been published in Yale publications.)

Participation:

1/3 of the final grade will be based on attendance and active seminar participation – vital elements in a discussion course.

Each student should read The Washington Post online (I will arrange for log-ins which will bypass the paywall for everyone in the class) and other newspapers, outlets, or blogs of your choice for at least 30 minutes a day. We will discuss the central news of the day or week---not just the substance of coverage but what you like or don’t like in the various accounts---during each seminar session. A different student each week will be asked to choose a topic from the week’s news to focus on in our discussion.
Please bring examples of stories with incorrect or missing information to class; all major news publications and the Yale Daily News are acceptable sources.

Application

The seminar is open to all sophomores, juniors and seniors. The application will consist of two parts. The first should be a personal statement explaining your interest in the course, your Yale class year, any previous writing courses, your main extra-curricular activities and any journalism or work experience. The second part should be a writing sample---an article that has been published anywhere or a paper you have submitted for a class. The application, which is available on the English department website, should be submitted by noon on December 9 by uploading it to my course site on Classes*v2. I encourage people who are writers or editors of campus publications to apply, but I also want students who have little or no experience with campus publications to apply as well.

Course Schedule

Note: This schedule is not written in stone. There may be events that occur during the semester that are important news and lend themselves to short papers, analysis and discussion during the seminar. So standby; it is a volatile time. The presidential primaries and caucuses should give us additional material for journalistic inquiry.

First class: Friday, Jan. 22 Class theme: Watergate:

To read for today: All the President’s Men (1974), Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward. I will provide a copy to each student in the class.

To watch for today (optional): Film, All the President’s Men (1976) and film, Spotlight (2015), about the Boston Globe’s expose of sexual abuse by Catholic priests.

To write by Wednesday, Jan. 20 (2 days before class): A 1-3 page paper on how the Watergate scandal might have been covered if it
had occurred today in the internet age. Include a frank critique of the reporting methods described in the book. Email both Evelyn and myself your Watergate paper by midnight, Wednesday, Jan. 20.

To discuss in today’s class: We will address the role of journalism, its strengths, weaknesses, and the impact of the Internet in this new era. We will also discuss your expectations for the seminar. Please be prepared to contribute to a lively discussion.

Assignment: Class profile subjects will be assigned. They are due February 8. You must interview at least 10 people, including the subject. That gives each of you a little over two weeks to complete the profile.

Monday, Jan. 25 Class theme: A Critique of Journalism:

To read for today:; The Journalist & the Murderer, Parts 1 & 2, Janet Malcom, The New Yorker (in course packet); The Years of Writing Dangerously, Andrew Sullivan, The Dish (in course packet); A Closer Look: Three Golden Ages of Journalism? Paul Steiger, ProPublica (in course packet).

Assignment: Write a 1-3 page paper with your thoughts on Janet Malcom. Was she right or wrong? Send to me and to Evelyn via email by midnight, Saturday, January 23.

Monday, February 1 Class theme: Iowa caucus/political reporting


To write by Saturday, January 30: Write a 3-4 page “scene setter” story for the Iowa caucus establishing the players, stakes and likely outcome. Share with Evelyn, myself and the class via email by midnight on Saturday, January 30.

To discuss in today’s class: Today we will workshop the scene setters – please have all of them read prior to class. Through
this exercise we will act as a reporting team to combine the best attributes of each into one article.

Assignment: File a 1-2 page story with me via email on the Iowa results and how your scene-setter now appears by midnight of Wednesday, February 3.

Monday February 8 Class theme: Profile review and Iowa caucus:

To write for today: Profiles are due today. Please email to me and to Evelyn. Please bring a copy to give to the person you profiled, who will write a critique in response by Feb. 11.

To discuss in today’s class: What happened in Iowa? Why? What does it mean? What did you think of the coverage? What was the best and worst of the coverage?

Monday February 15 Class theme: Statistics & data:

To read for today: The Rubber Room, Steve Brill, The New Yorker (in course packet); Bitter Pill: Why Medical Bills Are Killing Us, Steve Brill, Time Magazine (in course packet)

To write for Thursday Feb. 11: Write a 1-2 page critique of the profile written about you. Send to the profile’s author, to me and to Evelyn via email by midnight on Thursday, Feb. 11.

To discuss in today’s class: What did you learn about yourself from writing the profile? What are the strengths and weaknesses of profile writing? What do you think of Brill’s pieces? How did his use of data affect the stories?

Monday February 22 Class theme: War and Seymour Hersh

To read for today: The My Lai articles, Seymour Hersh, St. Louis Post-Dispatch (relevant pages reprinted in “Reporting Vietnam are in the course packet); pp. 50-55 and 206-208 in The Last of the President’s Men, Bob Woodward (in course packet) ; The Killing of Osama bin Laden, Seymour Hersh, London Review of Books (in course packet); The many problems with Seymour Hersh’s Osama bin Laden conspiracy theory, Max Fisher, Vox (in course packet); Death of Osama bin Laden: Phone call pointed U.S. to

To discuss in today’s class: How did Hersh do? What does it mean to describe journalism as “the best obtainable version of the truth?” What could be true but not obtainable or provable? What is the duty of a journalist to be empirical? Should a journalist be willing to challenge conventional wisdom with assertions that cannot yet be proven?

Monday February 29 Class theme: Opinion pieces and the presidential campaign

To write for Thursday Feb. 25: Write a newspaper column in favor of the presidential candidate of your choice. Do research, cite sources and make a cogent argument for why that person should be president. This can be written out of personal conviction or you can consider yourself a hired writer for the candidate’s website. Send to me and to Evelyn via email by midnight on Thursday, Feb. 25.

To discuss in today’s class: We will discuss your candidate papers. Could the best paper be about the worst candidate?

Monday March 7 Class theme: In-depth reporting:


To discuss in today’s class: Why did these in-depth stories work? What were their weaknesses?

Assignment: No later than March 11 (beginning of spring break), turn in via email an initial outline and a draft of the first 200-250 words of your final project, a report on your progress
to date and your plan for finishing. This should incorporate information from the interviews you have conducted and research you have done up to this point as well as indicate what interviews and reporting you have left to do, and what your strategy is for completing the project. It should be based on your consultations with me in my office hours or by phone. You must turn in an outline at this point to receive full credit for the final project at the end of the course.

No class: Monday March 14 and Monday, March 21 (spring break)

Monday March 28 Class theme: Covering The Supreme Court


To discuss in today’s class: What was the reporting method used by Woodward and Armstrong? Was it appropriate and necessary? Was the court’s decision principled or political? Who covers the Supreme Court well? What has the impact of SCOTUSblog.com and similar sites been? What long-form reporting on the court (books) and shorter newspaper and magazine articles are you familiar with? Find and discuss some examples, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of both.

Monday April 4 Class theme: Interviewing the president:

To read for today: The transcript of my July 10, 2010 interview with President Obama and the memo with questions that I sent the president in advance of the interview(in course packet). Also read Obama’s Wars, Bob Woodward (the whole book or the sections where the interview was used – consult the index entry for Obama and the source notes for each chapter at the back of the book). I will provide each student with a copy of the book.

To write for Thursday, March 31: Write a 1-3 page paper with your observations after reading the interview and observing how it was used in the book. Include a critique of questions asked or not asked. What did you learn about the president? Was he
telling the truth? In his 2009 inaugural address, President Obama stated, “Our security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example, the tempering qualities of humility and restraint.” What do you think of that statement after reading the interview? Please send your papers to me, to Evelyn and to the rest of the class via email by midnight on Thursday March 31.

To discuss in today’s class: We will discuss the conclusions you reached in your papers and pick apart the interview. We will workshop the pieces into the best critique of the interview.

Monday April 11 Class theme: Emotional Truth (guest instructor Elsa Walsh)

Elsa Walsh, my wife and most recently a staff writer for the New Yorker and previously for The Washington Post, will be in New Haven to teach the class.


To write by Thursday April 7: Write a 1-3 paper commenting on what emotional truth was uncovered in each reading. Please email to me, Evelyn and Elsa Walsh (elsa.walsh@gmail.com) by midnight on Thursday, April 7.

To discuss in today’s class: Please read the assigned readings thoroughly and be prepared for a robust discussion.

Monday April 18 Class theme: Mistakes

To read for today: “A Rape on Campus,” Sabrina Rubin Erdely, Rolling Stone (in course packet) and “’A Rape on Campus’: What went wrong”, The CJS report (in course packet); Rolling Stone and the temptations of narrative journalism, George Packer, The New Yorker (in course packet). Please also find and read another critique or defense of the Rolling Stone story from the news source of your choice.
To write for Thursday, April 14: A 1-3 page piece on the reporting methods and mistakes in Rolling Stone’s piece A Rape on Campus, with an emphasis on what you as a journalism student might do to avoid those kinds of mistakes in your own reporting. Email to me and to Evelyn by midnight of Thursday, April 14.

OR: to write for today (optional): If any student prefers not to do the above reading assignment, he or she may elect to go to a movie, read a book, or attend a concert and write a 3-4 page review instead. I suggest consulting examples of book and arts reviews in The Washington Post and The New York Times before writing your own. Send to me and to Evelyn via email by midnight on Thursday, April 14.

Final class, Monday April 25

Class theme: Interrogate Woodward

To read for today: Three NYT stories on Bob Woodward (in your course packet): From Low-Level Aides to Power Wielders, Sources Shape Reporter’s Books, Jason DeParle; Bob Woodward, The Washington Post and His Many Books, Alex S. Jones; A New Story For 2 Rivals from the 70’s, Felicity Barringer.

To watch for today: Video excerpts of Alex Butterfield and Bob Woodward interview.

To discuss in today’s class: Please use this class to ask me anything you would like about the course, your final projects, The Washington Post, or journalism in general. Please come prepared with constructive criticism to improve the class in the future.

Assignment: Complete final projects by May 11.

Reading Period, April 29-May 5:

I will be available by email or phone throughout this period for questions or consultations about your final project. (As will Evelyn.)

Final projects are due by midnight on May 11. Please email me and Evelyn your final projects no later than today.
Checklist for the 12 written assignments:

1. **For Wednesday, Jan. 20, by midnight:** A 1-3 page paper on how the Watergate scandal might have been covered if it had occurred today in the internet age. Include a frank critique of the reporting methods described in the book. Email to me and to Evelyn.

2. **For Saturday, January 23, by midnight:** Write a 1-3 page paper with your thoughts on Janet Malcom. Was she right or wrong? Email to me and to Evelyn.

3. **For Saturday, January 30, by midnight:** Write a 3-4 page “scene setter” story for the Iowa caucus establishing the players, stakes and likely outcome. Email to me, Evelyn and the rest of the class.

4. **For Wednesday, February 3, by midnight:** File a 1-2 page story with me via email on the Iowa results and how your scene-setter now appears. Email to me and to Evelyn.

5. **For Monday, February 8, by midnight:** Class profiles are due. You must interview at least 10 people, including the subject. Please email to me and to Evelyn and bring a copy to class for your profile subject.

6. **For Thursday Feb. 11 by midnight:** Write a 1-2 page critique of the profile written about you. Send to the profile author, to me and to Evelyn.

7. **For Thursday, February 25, by midnight:** Write a newspaper column in favor of the presidential candidate of your choice. Do research, cite sources and make a cogent argument for why that person should be president. This can be written out of personal
conviction or you can consider yourself a hired writer for the candidate’s website. Email to me and to Evelyn.

8. For no later than midnight of Friday, March 11: Write an initial outline and a draft of the first 200-250 words of your final project, including a report on your progress to date and your plan for finishing. This should incorporate information from the interviews you have conducted and research you have done up to this point as well as indicate what interviews and reporting you have left to do, and what your strategy is for completing the project. It should be based on your consultations with me in my office hours or by phone. You must turn in an outline at this point to receive full credit for the final project at the end of the course. Please email to me and to Evelyn.

9. For Thursday, March 31 by midnight: Write a 1-3 page paper with your observations after reading the interview and observing how it was used in the book. Include a critique of questions asked or not asked. What did you learn about the president? Was he telling the truth? In his 2009 inaugural address, President Obama stated, “Our security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example, the tempering qualities of humility and restraint.” What do you think of that statement after reading the interview? Please email to me, to Evelyn and to the class.

10. For Thursday, April 7 by midnight: Write a 1-3 paper commenting on what emotional truth was uncovered in each reading. Please email to me, to Evelyn and to Elsa Walsh (elsa.walsh@gmail.com).

11. For Thursday, April 14 by midnight: A 1-3 page piece on the reporting methods and mistakes in Rolling Stone’s piece A Rape on Campus, with an emphasis on what you as a journalism student might do to avoid those kinds of mistakes in your own reporting. Please email to me and to Evelyn.
OR: Optional assignment for Thursday, April 14 by midnight:
If a student elects not to do the Rolling Stone reading/writing assignment, he or she may elect to go to a movie, read a book, or attend a concert and write a 3-4 page review instead. Email to me and to Evelyn.

12. For no later than Wednesday, May 11 by midnight: Final projects are due. Please email to me and to Evelyn.