



Methods & Practices: Truth, Fiction, Media and Politics

JOUR-9202 DC1

Spring 2019

Thursdays 6:15-9:15 p.m.

Room Location: B109

Instructor Information

- Seth Borenstein
- Office: 202-641-9454; Cell: 202-841-4530
- Office is next door, 1100 13th St. NW; fifth floor, The Associated Press; Washington DC 20005
- Meetings by advance appointment only. Preferred meeting times: 6:30-8 p.m. Wednesdays; 9-10 a.m. Mondays. For appointment, contact by email.
- Seth.borenstein@nyu.edu; sb4314@nyu.edu

Course Information

This will be a hands-on course examining the idea of truth and spin in Washington D.C., politics, governance, journalism, science and society. It will be part overview and lecture on topics central to the course and part active reporting and writing. Spin is the Washington art of taking a biased interpretation of an issue or event and making it seem truth-y even when it's not quite factual. This is a user's guide for reporters and non-journalists alike. Learn how to spot and dodge the misleading factoid and the incomplete truths, along with the history and reasoning behind manipulation of information. Advice from those who practice spin, those who successfully avoid it and what it's like to be stuck as a victim of spin. Also, with the proliferation of fake and bias news sites, this course will be a guide that helps students navigate the minefield misinformation, even from officialdom. This is also an introduction to journalism class and how it interacts with politics, policy and society. Students will learn to write in journalistic style, which is quite different from academic writing. It is writing shorter, simpler and objectively.

Course Overview and Goals

Students will write frequently, often **in** class and **on** deadline. To take advantage of the unique Washington location, events and distinct attitude in the city, students will participate in press conferences and go to public hearings on Capitol Hill. This class will have a special emphasis on the Trump administration and on environmental/science issues. Invited guest speakers are from NASA, NOAA, environmental activist groups, energy lobbyists and Washington media. The course also will simulate the real newsroom atmosphere in that plans may change at a moment's notice because of breaking news. The news cycle will at times determine what is discussed and worked on during class. There will be at least one class that is not on the syllabus and will seem to be out of the blue. That is on purpose. This class will be a broad taste of journalism for the non-journalist and students will learn how to write news. Be warned, this syllabus is a flexible guide that will be changed frequently like the news. Some of it may change because of guest speaker's changing schedules and breaking news. We may try to fact check some kind of event live if timing works out.

Upon Completion of this Course, students will be able to:

- Students will learn how to spot and handle spin and understand how and why it is done in Washington.
- Students will learn how to get to the essence of truth and ask incisive questions.
- Students will learn how to write in journalistic style about government, science..

Course Requirements

Class Participation

Ask questions, give opinions, challenge instructor and guest speakers. Take part in in-class exercises. Participation is 25 percent of final grade. No cell phone use in class unless specifically told otherwise. Laptops should be brought to class.

Assignment 1 Before the first class, especially during the first week you are in DC, take a few minutes to walk around the area near the NYU/DC building. Use as many of your senses as possible (look, listen, feel, smell and taste). Look for something unusual _ at least to you _ in a 10-block radius of NYU/DC. Seek out what is not like where you had been (either home campus or home) and especially something that strikes you as odd. Then by 6 p.m. first day of class (Feb. 7), email me at sb4314@nyu.edu with one or two sentences about what you found unusual and why. Be prepared to talk about it in the first class.

Assignment 2 In the weeks between session 1 and Apr.18, attend a committee hearing on Capitol Hill, observe the proceedings and the press table, the interaction, and read any coverage that may have come from it. Let me know when you have attended a hearing (if you can't because of internships and classes let me know and I'll find an alternative for you). You will then discuss in class what you saw and heard for about five minutes on April 18.

Grading of Assignments

The grade for this course will be determined according to the following formula:

Assignments/Activities	% of Final Grade
Non-final writing assignments	30%
Participation	25%
Final exam	15%
Final project	15%
Midterm exam	8%
Non-writing other (Fact check, you decide)	7%

Letter Grades

Letter grades for the entire course will be assigned as follows:

Letter Grade	Points	Percent
A	4.00	94-100
A-	3.67	90-93
B+	3.33	87-89
B	3.00	84-86
B-	2.67	80-83
C+	2.33	77-79
C	2.00	74-76
C-	1.67	70-73
D+	1.33	67-69
D	1.00	65-66
F	.00	Below 65

View Grades

Instructor keeps a current spreadsheet on grading and shares grades at midterm

Course Schedule

- *Topics and Assignments are subject to change with breaking news. Journalism is about adapting to change.* Note the reading and assignments are listed on the date they are due, so please read ahead one week so you will know the assignment for the week.

Topics and Assignments

Week/Date	Topic	Reading	Assignment Due
Session 1 7- Feb-19	Overview. Everything is about story telling. Media, politics, the truth and storytelling in Washington and Society. The importance of stories. Stories in journalism. Telling stories. Stories that inform. Stories that spur to action. Stories that entertain. Stories that spur change.	None, but you can get started on All The President's Men and/or Merchants of Doubt.	Before our first session, walk in your new neighborhood. Find something strange, unusual, or telling about anything in the nine-block radius around NYU/DC. Before class, email me a one or two sentence description and then be prepared to discuss it in class
Session 2 14- Feb-19	Finding, developing stories: What's the difference between fiction and non-fiction stories. How to find journalism stories and where to find them. What makes a good story. The people factor. Objectivity. A Lucky Wind.	For Session 2: Read New York Times Love Story And instructor's Hot Lunch Story And instructor's Retired Astronaut story	
ATTENTION: SPECIAL SATURDAY CLASS Session 2.5 16- Feb-19 9:30 a.m. to 1 pm	Science Conference: The world's largest organization of scientists _ the American	Due for session 2.5: Learn about AAAS meeting by reading group's website	Due for session 2.5: Choose one session that day (11 am or after that you want to highlight and possibly go to and email me at

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	<p>Association for the Advancement of Sciences _ is having their annual meeting in Washington DC from Feb. 14-17. We have a special class on Saturday, Feb. 16 (meeting in NYU lobby at 9:30 a.m. We will attend a press conference and meeting sessions and talk with working journalists and scientists.</p>		<p>sb4314@nyu.edu, what it is by Feb. 15 at 11 p.m.)</p>
<p>Session 3 21-Feb-19</p>	<p>Writing like a journalist. Keeping it short and simple. Being objective. Hands-on in class lecture and lots of writing. Writing obituaries as a start. Edna Buchanan. The Miller Chop</p>	<p>For session 3: Read chapters 2 and 3, Simplicity and Clutter, of Zinsser. Read Farenthold Pulitzer-winning stories. Pulitzer Prize winning coverage</p>	
<p>Session 4 28-Feb-19</p>	<p>Part 1: Washington, White House and Loyalty. We attend a public session in the NYU/DC auditorium with the author of They Said No to Nixon, which is about fellow Republicans who stood up to the</p>	<p>Read start of They Said No To Nixon</p> <p>Read about the session beforehand.</p>	<p>For session 4: Write your obituary, view Murrow versus McCarthy.</p>

Week/Date	Topic	Reading	Assignment Due
	<p>president.</p> <p>Part 2: What is truth? And where do we find it? Reporting. In this class we take what is an entire major (or at the very least an entire course) and figure it out in one three-hour session. How do we know what is true and what is not? What about incomplete truths? Is a partial truth also a partial lie? Is even the concept of truthiness true? Is truth relative? Are your relatives truthful? If your mother says she loves you, should you check it out (old journalism saying)? Who can you trust? How do you trust? And if that's not enough, what is the meaning of life? Did Washington chop down a cherry tree? Did Columbus sail to prove the world is round?</p>		
<p>Session 5 7- Mar-19</p>	<p>Part 1: Writing journalism, history and fiction and the differences: Jesse Holland covers race and ethnicity for The</p>	<p>Washington Post on Holland. Read story one, story two and story three by Holland. Also, read Chapters</p>	<p>Look at Holland's website:</p>

Week/Date	Topic	Reading	Assignment Due
	<p>Associated Press and has covered the White House, Supreme Court and Congress. He also has written two non-fiction histories, two novels “Who Is The Black Panther?” and “Star Wars: The Force Awakens: Finn’s Story.” You will have to write a story from his lecture.</p> <p>Part 2: Advanced Writing and more truth.</p>	<p>6 and 9 Zinsser, “Words” and “The Lead and the Ending.” Start reading “All The President’s Men.”</p>	
<p>ATTENTION SPECIAL SUNDAY SESSION (5.5) 10- Mar-19] 1-4 p.m., meet at 1 p.m. at NYU DC lobby.</p>	<p>Washington political and journalism scandal tour. How truth wins out over hypocrisy sometimes in Washington when it is exposed. A walking narrated tour of some of Washington’s scandal and journalism (and sometimes both at once) spots _ not all, we only have three hours and will still cover more than five miles walking. It’s a further introduction to Washington with an emphasis on how the story was broken, covered and</p>	<p>For Session 5.5, Sept. 22: Read New York Times: Gary Hart's downfall and Vanity Fair: Shattered Glass.</p>	<p>Bring pen/pencil and notebook, metro pass and wear good walking shoes and weather appropriate clothing.</p>

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	changed life, policy or politics. Scandals include sex, drugs, money and lying. All that's missing is the rock and roll.		
Session 6 14- Mar-19	No Class This Week. Make up for weekend class earlier	There is lots of reading due March 28. It would be smart to get a good start on it.	Although there is no class, you still must submit 250-word start of a story from Jesse Holland lecture. Due Mar. 14 by 6 p.m.
21- Mar-19	Spring Break - No Class	There is lots of reading due March 28. It would be smart to get a good start on it.	
Session 7 28- Mar-19	<p>Part 1: Fake information. Don't call it fake news, it's not news. How to recognize disinformation.</p> <p>Part 2: Midterm Short only one hour. Open book/computer 10 questions.</p>	Read first five chapters of Oreskes and Conway. Read first story , second story , third story and fourth story on false information. Also, read fifth story and sixth story (both by instructor) along with seventh and eighth stories	Rewrites of obituaries are due.
Session 8 4- Apr-19	Part 1: Getting the information. How to interview (we'll interview each other). Take good notes. You will have to write about your fellow student. How to find experts. Freedom of Information Act requests.		Rewrite of Holland article due.

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	<p>Part 2: You Decide. We'll talk about decision making by editors/managers. Why some stories are promoted as more important than others. Then, you will be assigned to play editor for your own website. You will be divided into teams and make your own website concepts and decide what should be put on it and what shouldn't. Grade for in-class performance.</p>		
<p>Session 9 11- Apr-19</p>	<p>Case study: Smoking. Science and how industry and special interests put science on trial, using the concept of doubt, starting with smoking. More in-class writing and editing.</p>		<p>Story from your interview of fellow students in Session 8. File Freedom of Information Act request, cc the instructor. Submit your topic for final writing project, include potential sources/interviews and potential databases to use.</p>
<p>Session 10 18- Apr-19</p>	<p>Part 1: Investigative reporting. AP investigative reporter Chad Day will talk about digging in for investigative projects and the Trump-Russia</p>	<p>Read most recent stories by Chad Day. Instructor will provide them week before. Read all five climate stories in series by instructor. And the first, second, and third stories on climate change last</p>	

Week/Date	Topic	Reading	Assignment Due
	<p>probe. Part 2: What's Congress really like. Students share in five minute presentations what they found when they went to a congressional hearing or press conference.</p>	<p>year by instructor.</p>	
<p>Session 11 25- Apr-19</p>	<p>Part 1 climate change. Kalee Kreider, climate adviser to the United Nations Foundation, former press secretary to Al Gore.. Part 2: Fact-checking. Instructor will talk about how to fact check politicians, government. Pay close attention. We will fact check something live somehow if not this session another time. AP is now fact checking more than just government but fake news.</p>	<p>Read a few stories from AP Fact Check website. Read the following articles: AP Fact Check, "Trump Won Presidency Lost Popular Vote," AP Fact Check, "Clinton Email Claims Collapse Under FBI Probe," AP Fact Check Trump's 11 Climate Goofs. AP Fact Check, "Climate Science Most GOP Candidates flunk climate science."</p>	
<p>Session 12 2- May-19</p>	<p>What is risky, really? And course wrap. Presented in a game show format with teams competing to see who is smarter</p>		<p>Submit your topic for final writing project, include potential sources/interviews and potential databases to use.</p>

Week/Date	Topic	Reading	Assignment Due
	<p>about risk. Risk, perceptions and fear and how to put everything in context. From terrorism to nuclear power to natural disasters. Cost benefit analyses and the statistical value of your life. How do the professionals analyze risk? How is risk communicated by politicians and officials. How do the media convey risk? Which is riskier: terrorism or the flu? (Each year more people die of flu than in 40 years of global terrorism. Yet the government spends far more money on terrorism than the flu.)</p>		
<p>Session 13 9- May-19</p>	<p>Guns, Ethics and putting it all together. As the gun control debate evolves, we'll examine how guns, violence and the Second Amendment fit with what we've learned. Have gun rights advocates learned from the cigarette and climate battles? Then what about ethics. What can you do with this knowledge? What should you do? What</p>		<p>Optional: If you want me to read your final project, get it to me by May 19.</p>

Week/Date	Topic	Reading	Assignment Due
	shouldn't you do? How this all fits in everyday life. Using reporting and writing skills when you are not a journalist. What it all means.		
Session 14 16- May-19	No Class This Week. Make up for weekend class earlier in semester		Even though there's no class, your final project (15 percent of your grade) IS DUE May 16 at 11 p.m. EDT.
Session 15 Choose one of two options: 19-May-19 OR 23- May-19	Final Exam		

Course Materials

Required Textbooks & Materials

- **On Writing Well, 30th Anniversary Edition: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction**, Zinsser; Publisher: Harper Perennial (2006) ISBN-13: 978-0060891541
- **All the President's Men**, Bernstein and Woodward; Publisher: Simon & Schuster (1974) ISBN: 671-21781-Xh
- **Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming**, Oreskes and Conway; Publisher: Bloomsbury Press (2011) ISBN-10: 1608193942; ISBN-13: 978-1608193943]

Optional Textbooks & Materials (may be added as news changes/breaks)

- David Farenthold's [Pulitzer Prize winning coverage](#)
- [The stories](#) of Jeff Horwitz.
- Murrow versus McCarthy [Video](#).
- Gary Hart's [Downfall](#).
- Vanity Fair: [Shattered Glass](#).
- Elizabeth Kolbert, the New Yorker, Annals of Science, [Climate of Man part 1](#), April 25, 2005.
- [Elizabeth Rosenthal](#), New York Times.
- Fact Check.org on [swift boat ads](#).
- Michael Dobbs, Washington Post, on [Swift Boat ads](#).
- Americans for Non Smokers Rights on [Steve Milloy](#).

- AP Fact Check, "[Trump Won Presidency Lost Popular Vote.](#)"
- AP Fact Check, "[Trumps Distortion – Clinton.](#)"
- AP Fact Check, "[Overstatements in Trump's Economic Speech.](#)"
- AP Fact Check, "[Clinton Email Claims Collapse Under FBI Probe.](#)"
- AP Fact Check, "[Ted Cruz Misstates Science of Climate Change.](#)"
- AP Fact Check, "[Climate Science Most GOP Candidates.](#)"
- Seth Borenstein, The Associated Press: [Divided America: Global Warming.](#)
- Charles Hanley, The Associated Press, [On Endless Ice.](#)
- James Dellingpole, [The Final Nail in Coffin of Anthropogenic Global Warming?](#)
- Borenstein, Raphael Satter, Malcolm Ritter, [The AP: Climategate Science Not Faked, But Not Pretty.](#)
- Sen. James Inhofe, [A Skeptic's Guide to Debunking Global Warming Alarmism.](#)
- Wesley Pruden, The Washington Times, [Not Dead Yet and Cooling.](#)
- Borenstein, The AP, [Statisticians Reject Global Cooling.](#)

Resources

- **Access your course materials:** [NYU Classes](#) (nyu.edu/its/classes)
- **Databases, journal articles, and more:** [Bobst Library](#) (library.nyu.edu)
- **Assistance with strengthening your writing:** [NYU Writing Center](#) (nyu.mywconline.com)
- **Obtain 24/7 technology assistance:** [IT Help Desk](#) (nyu.edu/it/servicedesk)

Course Policies

Attendance and Tardiness

Study abroad at Global Academic Centers is an academically intensive and immersive experience, in which students from a wide range of backgrounds exchange ideas in discussion-based seminars. Learning in such an environment depends on the active participation of all students. And since classes typically meet once or twice a week, even a single absence can cause a student to miss a significant portion of a course. **To ensure the integrity of this academic experience, class attendance at the centers is mandatory, and unexcused absences will affect students' semester grades.** Students are responsible for making up any work missed due to absence. Repeated absences in a course may result in failure. At all Global Academic Centers, unexcused absences will be penalized with a two percent deduction from the student's final course grade (for courses that meet once per week; for courses that meet twice per week, it is a one percent reduction per missed class).

To seek an excused absence for medical reasons, students must use the online absence reporting form within 24 hours of their first missed class. Students may be required to produce a doctor's note with that day's date, especially if the student has missed any classes already that semester or if exams/presentations/papers occurred in the missed class.

Non-medical absences must be discussed with the Academic Staff at least 7 days before the missed date(s) in question. If faculty members do not receive notification of an excused absence, the student has not procured an excused absence.

NYU Washington, DC expects students to arrive to class promptly (both at the beginning and after any breaks), to be attentive, and to remain for the duration of the class. If full class

attendance and participation becomes a problem, it is the prerogative of each lecturer to apply the rule for unexcused absences, which may include a two percent deduction from the student's final course grade.

Students are responsible for making up any work missed due to absence. This means they should initiate email and/ or office hour discussions to discuss any missed lectures and assignments and arrange a timeline for submitting missed work.

Final exams must be taken at their designated times. Final exams may not be taken early, and students should not plan to leave Washington, DC before the end of the finals week.

Please note that for classes involving a field trip or other external visit, transportation difficulties are never grounds for an excused absence. It is the student's responsibility to arrive at the announced meeting point in a punctual and timely fashion. Staff members may always be reached by cell phone for advice regarding public transportation.

Late Assignment

- 1) Written work due in class must be submitted during the class time to the professor.
- 2) Late work should be emailed to the faculty as soon as it is completed.
- 3) Late work will be reduced for a fraction of a letter grade (e.g., A to A-, A- to B+, etc.) for every day it is late, including weekends.
- 4) Written work during the semester that is submitted 5 days after the submission date (including weekends) without an agreed extension fails and is given a zero.
- 5) Students who arrive to class late for an exam do not have automatic approval to take extra time to complete the exam.
- 6) Students who miss an exam (including the final) without previously arranged permission will receive a zero on that exam.
- 7) Assignments due during finals week that are submitted more than 3 days without previously arranged extensions will not be accepted and will receive a zero. Any exceptions or extensions for work during finals week must be discussed with the Site Director.

Incomplete Grade Policy

An "incomplete" is a temporary grade that indicates that the student has, for good reason, not completed all of the course work. This grade is not awarded automatically nor is it guaranteed; rather, the student must ask the instructor for a grade of "incomplete," present documented evidence of illness, an emergency, or other compelling circumstances, and clarify the remaining course requirements with the instructor.

In order for a grade of "incomplete" to be registered on the transcript, the student must fill out a form, in collaboration with the course instructor and the academic administration at the site; it should then be submitted to the site's academic office. The submitted form must include a deadline by which the missing work will be completed. This deadline may not be later than the end of the following semester.

Academic Honesty/Plagiarism

As the University's policy on "[Academic Integrity for Students at NYU](#)" states: "At NYU, a commitment to excellence, fairness, honesty, and respect within and outside the classroom is essential to maintaining the integrity of our community. By accepting membership in this community, students take responsibility for demonstrating these values in their own conduct and for recognizing and supporting these values in others." **Students at Global Academic Centers must follow the University and school policies.**

The presentation of another person's words, ideas, judgment, images, or data as though they were your own, whether intentionally or unintentionally, constitutes an act of plagiarism.

NYU Washington, DC takes plagiarism very seriously; penalties follow and may exceed those set out by your home school. All your written work must be submitted as a hard copy AND in electronic form to the lecturer. Your lecturer may ask you to sign a declaration of authorship form.

It is also an offense to submit work for assignments from two different courses that is substantially the same (be it oral presentations or written work). If there is an overlap of the subject of your assignment with one that you produced for another course (either in the current or any previous semester), you MUST inform your professor.

For guidelines on academic honesty, clarification of the definition of plagiarism, examples of procedures and sanctions, and resources to support proper citation, please see:

[NYU Policies and Guidelines on Academic Integrity](#)

[NYU Library Guides](#)

Disability Disclosure Statement

Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

Religious Observances

Students observing a religious holiday during regularly scheduled class time are entitled to miss class without any penalty to their grade. This is for the holiday only and does not include the days of travel that may come before and/or after the holiday.

Students must notify their professor and the Washington, DC Academics team in writing via email at least 7 days before being absent for this purpose.

Your Lecturer

Seth Borenstein is a national science writer for The Associated Press, the world's largest news organization, covering issues ranging from climate change to astronomy. He is the winner of numerous journalism awards, including the National Journalism Award for environment reporting in 2007 from the Scripps Foundation and the Outstanding Beat

Reporting award from the Society of Environmental Journalists in 2008 and 2004. He was part of an AP Gulf of Mexico oil spill reporting team that won the 2010 George Polk Award for Environment Reporting and a special merit award as part of the 2011 Grantham environment reporting prizes. He was part of a team of finalists for the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for coverage of the Columbia space shuttle disaster. A science and environmental journalist for more than 20 years, covering everything from hurricanes to space shuttle launches, Borenstein has also worked for Knight Ridder Newspapers' Washington Bureau, The Orlando Sentinel, and the Sun-Sentinel in Fort Lauderdale. He is the co-author of three out-of-print books, two on hurricanes and one on popular science. He has flown in zero gravity and once tried out for Florida Marlins (unsuccessfully).

