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ProWatch: Critically thinking about reporters' work

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TNT
21
2013

Top submissions to
Teaching News Terrifically
in the 21st Century

Vol. 2

Newspaper and Online News Division
Association for Education
in Journalism and Mass Communication

About TNT21

This booklet shares teaching ideas honored in 2013 in Teaching News Terrifically in the 21st Century, the teaching ideas competition of the Newspaper and Online News Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. TNT21 was founded in 2009 to publicly acknowledge good ideas for foundational journalism courses: newswriting, reporting and editing.

Ideas are accepted in three divisions:

- Full-time faculty members
- Adjunct professors
- Graduate-student instructors

The competition awards prizes of \$100 for the best teaching idea from each group and gives certificates to others whose work is honored.

Deadlines for contest entries typically are in the summer, to allow instructors to enter materials outside the rush of fall/spring semesters, and are announced on the Newspaper and Online News Division listserv and on the JOURNET listserv. Teaching tips submitted should be suitable for use in newswriting, reporting or editing

courses, though they may be tailored for specific versions of those courses. For example, tips for teaching newswriting across media would be welcome, as would tips for teaching a specific type of reporting, such as public affairs reporting, business reporting or environmental reporting.

Tips can address practical skills or conceptual knowledge, showing, for example, how to teach students to report ethically or edit to avoid libel. Tips that help professors address the challenges of teaching in a world where technologies are rapidly changing are especially welcome.

Ideas are judged for their originality, innovative nature, ease of application, completeness, writing and whether they would work in more than one course and/or at different types of schools.

TNT21 has been administered since 2009 by Susan Keith, an associate professor in the Department of Journalism and Media Studies in the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J., and one of the Newspaper and Online News Division's teaching chairs.

2013 judges

Erin Coyle, Louisiana State University
Joel Campbell, Brigham Young University
Patricia Dobson, Eastern New Mexico University
Pamela B. Fine, University of Kansas
Kyle Heim, Seton Hall University
Kevin Lerner, Marist College
David Loomis, Indiana University of Pennsylvania
Mitchell McKenney, Kent State University
John Oudens, The New York Times
Craig Paddock, University of North Carolina Charlotte
Bill Reader, Ohio University
Scott Reinardy, University of Kansas
Chris Roberts, University of Alabama
Lisa A. Romero, University of Illinois
Carol Schlagheck, Eastern Michigan University
Robert N. Spicer, Millersville University
Leslie-Jean Thornton, Arizona State University

Second place, full-time faculty division

ProWatch: Critically thinking about reporters' work



Carla J. Kimbrough teaches reporting and editing at UNL, which she joined in August 2008 after a career in journalism. She worked as a reporter at the Lincoln (Neb.) Journal; as a reporter, copy editor and fill-in assignment editor at the Arkansas Gazette in Little Rock; and as a regional editor, city editor, or night metro editor at the Jackson (Tenn.) Sun, Marietta (Ohio) Times, Cincinnati Enquirer and Dayton Daily News. At the Denver Post, she was part of the senior management team and was responsible for newsroom recruitment and staff development.

By Carla J. Kimbrough
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Types of courses the idea could be used in: newswriting, reporting, editing

Target level: freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors, graduate students in professional programs

What is the goal of the assignment or exercise?

ProWatch, an activity in critical thinking, is an assignment that I use in beginning reporting and editing classes, but it can be adapted easily for use in editing and advanced reporting classes. It is designed to make students read the newspaper, identify sources of story ideas, develop interviewing skills, identify Associated Press style, think about presenting stories across platforms and strengthen story organization skills. This assignment is used throughout the semester so that students can gain these skills by critically examining the published work of professional journalists.

How does the assignment or exercise work?

To complete the ProWatch assignment, students need access to a print edition of a daily newspaper. The professor provides the questions students should answer and may offer guidance of story type (see instructions). The ProWatch assignment should be repeated several times to cultivate the skills mentioned above.

Students choose several published stories to examine, write a response paper in a question-and-answer format, and attach the article used. For example, when I used this assignment previously in a five-week summer reporting course, I asked the students to find two stories weekly: a story that caught their attention and a story that they normally wouldn't read. A professor can specify the newspaper section or story type to match lessons – speech; meeting; crime/police; feature; event; profile; business; sports, etc.

Each homework assignment takes an hour or less. To broaden the learning, students discuss their stories in small groups or a few students tell the class about the stories they examined. Students receive completion points rather than a grade. Students collect their stories in a three-ring binder to refer to later. It takes minimal time for maximum payoff in student learning.

How is the assignment innovative?

Regardless of the century, journalists need basic interviewing and writing skills. They need to know what basic questions are necessary to develop a story and then

To build your skills as a reporter, find one newspaper article each week to examine closely. Answer the questions below (do not exceed two pages) and attach the article you selected.

- Publication date and newspaper name
- Origin of story (where do you think the reporter found it?)
- What sources and how many did the reporter use to gather the information? Describe the role/title of the source. (Examples are officials, real people, documents).
- Identify 3 to 5 questions the reporter asked of each source.
- What question do you wish the reporter would have asked?
- What source/s was/were missing or would have improved the story?
- What type of lede did the reporter use and was it effective/ineffective, why?
- Circle the nutgraph.
- Find three examples of AP style.
- If this story has no visuals (graphics or photos), what could be added to illustrate this story visually? Be specific.
- If this story appeared online, what elements would you use to

they need to write the information in an organized way. But what “updates” this assignment is the thought process of telling traditional print stories online. Would it be best to tell the story with video or a photo slide show? If the story has no visuals, what could be created? Asking students to determine what visual and online options exist for print stories, helps them to think the way they must in a newsroom.

How do you overcome pitfalls?

This assignment is easy, but students need some background information to complete the assignment successfully. For example, do they have the vocabulary to discuss the quality of a lede or nutgraph? If not, give them those tools and then let them demonstrate an understanding by finding examples. Other than that, giving students detailed instructions on how to complete the assignment should be sufficient for students.

What is the impact of the assignment or exercise?

Students no longer simply read stories, but learn to dissect stories and extract lessons about reporting and writing. This assignment allows professors to introduce a critical thinking skill that young journalists will be able to use for years to come. When the assignment editor says, “I want a story something like this,” a reporter can dissect the story. In a course that requires a great deal of feedback, this assignment silently teaches students how to improve their work.