

# School of Communications

**Course:** Journalism 2750, Reporting Natural Disasters

**Term:** Spring 2010

**Instructor:** Professor Don Corrigan, [corrighd@webster.edu](mailto:corrighd@webster.edu), 247D Sverdrup

## **Course Description:**

This course provides aspiring journalists and writers on climate with the tools necessary to report on climatology and on natural phenomena that result in disaster for flora, fauna – and humans. Missouri and the Midwest provide an excellent location for field study and historical analysis when it comes to disaster coverage. Students will learn how to report on weather trauma from tornadoes, floods, lightning, snow storms, ice storms, temperature extremes and more.

## **Extended Course Description:**

The objective of the course is to equip future communicators with knowledge of a wide variety of meteorological events, and a specialized knowledge of how to report similar events in the future. The course also will examine important environmental issues related to weather and to coping with the aftermath of weather disasters.

Students will have a choice of writing journalistic articles and advocacy papers on the handling of past weather disasters, safety issues, response issues and the future of emergency management both from a state and national perspective. Special attention will be given to debates over emergency preparedness, emergency responses, as well as to the continuing debate over climate change and global warming.

There is not necessarily a “correct” position to be taken in these articles or public affairs features, but all of the writing must be well-researched, documented and/or attributed to reliable sources. Papers will be four pages in length at a minimum, typed and double-spaced. Photocopies of articles used for research should be included with the papers, and students should maintain a scrapbook of such research as well. There will also be two exams during the semester. Check syllabus outline for exam and paper due dates.

**Prerequisite:** Sophomore standing; JOUR 1030, Fundamentals of Reporting; or permission of instructor

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## Course Learning Outcomes:

- 1) Students will study seminal examples of natural disaster journalism, from the Galveston hurricane to Katrina to the 2008 winter tornado outbreak.
- 2) Students will learn the basic vocabulary of meteorology and weather, from classification of windstorms to heat indexes and wind chills.
- 3) Students will learn basic state and federal climate sources, as well as emergency and relief aid resources in disaster recovery.
- 4) Students will survey weather disaster history and learn why the past is often referenced in accounts of current natural disasters.
- 5) Controversy pervades disaster response and climatology forecasting and students will examine some of the most recent arguments.
- 6) Students will produce publishable articles and advocacy pieces on natural disaster impacts and safety response.
- 7) Students will analyze environmental issues related to natural disaster reporting.

## Materials and/or Required Textbooks:

Corrigan, Don; "Show Me... Nature's Wrath;" (St. Louis: Reedy Press, 2009)

Cerveney, Randy; "Freaks of the Storm;" (N.Y.: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006)

## Course schedule:

- Week 1: Jan. 11
1. Introduction: Covering Natural Disasters
  2. Hard News, Day-After, Features
  3. Global Warming Debate
- Week 2: Jan. 18
1. Tornadoes of the 19th Century
  2. St. Charles, Marshfield, Kirksville
  3. St. Louis Cyclone: 1896; #Assign #1 Weather Feature
- Week 3: Jan. 25
1. Tornadoes of the 20th Century
  2. Ruskin Heights to Gaslight Square
  3. Forecasting Comes of Age
- Week 4: Feb. 1
1. Tornadoes of the 21st Century
  2. Twisters, Popular Culture, Mythology
  3. Future Scenarios: It Could Happen Tomorrow
- Week 5: Feb. 8
1. Straight Line Winds: 2009 Case Study
  2. Hurricanes: Katrina and Ike
  3. Galveston: The Big One – Yellow Journalism?  
#1 Due; #2 Weather Safety Stories

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- Week 6: Feb. 15
1. Lightning; 59 Varieties
  2. Fatal Strikes: Golfers, Hikers, Campers
  3. Lightning Fires, Safety Issues
- Week 7: Feb. 22
1. Hail: Freaks of the Storm
  2. St. Louis 2001: Costliest Hail Storm Ever
  3. Hail in History: Plagues, Wars, Pestilence
- Week 8: March 1
1. Measuring Storms, Ranking Disasters
  2. Review for Midterm
  3. Midterm Exam;  
#2 Due; #3 Covering Climate Controversies
- Week 9: March 8
- SPRING BREAK
- Week 10: March 15
1. Flooding: Early Flood History
  2. When The Levee Breaks: 1927
  3. Role of Race in Early Disaster Response
- Week 11: March 22
1. Flash Floods, Rural & Urban
  2. Flooding: Environmental Hazard Disasters
  3. Flooding: Impact of Flood Plain Loss
- Week 12: March 29
1. 1993: Floods of Biblical Proportions
  2. 1993: Flood Volunteers/Hard Luck Stories
  3. 1993: Local & National Coverage  
#3 Due; #4 Covering Extremes – Past & Present
- Week 13: April 5
1. Blizzards: A Century of Coverage
  2. Thunder snows of the Midwest
  3. TV's Snow Storm Overkill
- Week 14: April 12
1. Ice Storms: On the Increase?
  2. Utility Woes; Highway Nightmares
  3. Covering Emergency Responders, FEMA, etc.
- Week 15: April 19
1. Heat Waves, Heat Indexes
  2. Dust Bowl Years: The Benchmark
  3. State Climatology Sources; #4 Story Due

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- Week 16: April 26
1. Cold Spells, Wind Chills
  2. Where did all the cold go?
  3. Review For Final

- Week 17: May 3
- Finals, Story Discussions, Course Roundup**

## **Assessment of Learning Outcomes/Course Policies:**

### GRADING SYSTEM:

Position Papers, Articles:	60%
Exams:	30%
Class Participation:	10%

### ATTENDANCE POLICY:

Regular attendance is a prerequisite for satisfactory completion of the course. Material in the exams will come from guest speaker visits. If your attendance is not satisfactory, you can expect your final grade to fall by at least the 10 percent allocated for class participation.

## **University Policy Statements:**

### **University Grading Standards:**

**The Undergraduate Catalog provides these guidelines and grading options:**

**A, A-** Superior work in the opinion of the instructor

**B+, B, B-** Good work in the opinion of the instructor

**C+, C, C-** Satisfactory work in the opinion of the instructor

**D+, D** Passing, but less than satisfactory work in the opinion of the instructor

**I** Incomplete work in the opinion of the instructor. If an Incomplete grade is submitted by the instructor, the student and the instructor must have an agreed upon deadline for completion of the required work.

**ZF** An incomplete which was not completed within one year of the end of the course. All Incompletes should be completed within a much shorter period of time before the automatic ZF is entered on the student's transcript. This grade of F cannot be undone.

**F** Unsatisfactory work in the opinion of the instructor

**W** Withdrawal from the course

***This course is governed by the University's policies, as published in the University catalog.***

**Academic Honesty:** The University is committed to high standards of academic honesty. Students will be held responsible for violations of these standards. Please refer to the university catalog for a definition of academic dishonesty and potential associated disciplinary actions. (Each instructor and/or Program Facilitator can add to and supplement this statement with their own policies on items such as plagiarism.)

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**Drops and Withdrawals:** Please be aware that the Drop/Add and Withdrawal dates are listed each semester on the University website, in the University catalog and in the Course Description book. If the course is dropped within the Drop/Add period, no notation of the course will appear on the student's transcript. Withdrawals take place after the published Drop date and a "W" in the course will appear on the student's transcript.

**Special Services:** If you have registered as a student with a documented disability and are entitled to classroom or testing accommodations, please inform the instructor at the beginning of the course of the accommodations you will require in this course so that these can be provided.

**Disturbances:** Since every student is entitled to full participation in class without interruption, disruption of class by inconsiderate behavior is not acceptable. Students are expected to treat the instructor and fellow students with dignity and respect, especially in cases where diversity of opinions arise. (Each instructor can list their own policies here with regards to cell phones, eating in class, etc.)

**Student Assignments Retained:** Some random student assignments or projects will be retained by the School of Communications for the purpose of academic assessment as it relates to student learning outcomes. In every such case, the student's name and all identifying information about the student will be removed from the assignment or project.

**Contact hours for this course:** It is essential that all classes meet for the full instructional time as scheduled. A class cannot be shortened in length without rescheduling and/or make up activities.