

The Beats

Plan to enjoy a regular diet of mass media in order to participate well in class. Follow apt Twitter feeds (use #comm316 as needed), subscribe to apt blogs and Tumblr feeds, read and watch various media outlets online, watch television, listen to radio, read newspapers and magazines in print, listen to speeches, observe advertising and promotions; move outside your usual genres or formats often, and stay current with whatever seems most newsworthy at any given moment. Use your observations to enter class discussions, making connections between them and our class reading and writing.

Develop particular expertise in one area by acting like a beat reporter, experiencing your one chosen beat broadly (local, regional, national, international) across the media (print, online, radio, television, books, advertising, PR, etc). The goal: observe media trends in subject matter and manner of coverage. The tasks: beat rolls and roundups (10% of the final grade) and one beat analysis (10% of the final grade).

Beat Rolls

Select a beat (politics, entertainment, business, science and technology, sports, health, education) on the first day of class. Then follow it regularly across the media (print, online, radio, television, books, advertising, PR, etc) and across the world (local, regional, national, international). Designate some specific but public format (Tumblr or a blog, Springpad, Delicious, or some other medium approved by me) to keep track of what you read and see and hear; email me with the URL of your "beat roll" so that I can compile and disseminate a list of URLs for us all to follow.

How to choose a medium for your beat roll:

- Recommended locations: Tumblr or a blog. Other options may include Springpad, Delicious, and Twitter. You may suggest other applications as well that permit follows, public interaction, and archives of some sort (since you will need this "roll" when you write your beat analysis).
- Designate an account, feed, or tag for this task: do not post anything unrelated to your beat here.
- Make your account interactive; invite comments, sharing, and recommendations.

How to roll your beat:

- Each time you experience some bit of media relevant to your beat, post it on your beat roll.
- Do not limit your posts to electronic media with URLs: post photos or notes about "traditional" media as well.
- For each post, include full citation of the media source in MLA format (a URL alone is insufficient).
- Create a backup: keep a running bibliography of what you post to your roll, in case it crashes.
- Do not merely post anything: always include some sort of brief comment that identifies the medium's intended audience and categorizes the piece itself (social, print, etc). Also write several sentences of comment on how the piece seems useful to a student of your beat: what have you learned from this piece about media writing in general and your beat's coverage in particular? You might discuss timeliness of reporting, multiplicity of authors, diction, layout, multimedia content, errata, or any number of other topics.
- Do not comment on the "content" of the beat but on the means by which that content is conveyed. For example, do not discuss Lady Gaga's wardrobe at The Grammy's but do note *how* her wardrobe was covered across the media (how quickly, in what venues, at what length, with how many photos, etc).
- Create at least ten posts per week from Weeks 2 to 16 of our course.

In addition to your regular posts, write at least one brief (1-3 paragraphs) reflection each week on what you are learning about media writing from following your beat. You may cite stories experienced during the week itself or write more generally about trends you are observing or questions you are developing.

If you get stuck:

- Make sure to venture outside of your "regular" spots at least occasionally. If you primarily follow a local beat, spend a week looking for its cousins in foreign media or expanding your coverage to a medium that you do not typically follow (print media will probably be the friend we must remember to call this semester).
- Keep the beat analysis in mind: your goal for the beat roll is to gather data for a paper, so occasionally take stock to see if you're gathering the kind of information you want or need to substantiate the conclusions you'd like to make then.

Beat Roundups

At the beginning of every class, we will spend about 15 minutes discussing the beats. Prepare to be called on to give a brief (1-2 minutes) oral report as to what's happening in your beat and what you have noticed about its coverage (ie what you will write in your weekly reflection" in your beat roll).

Beat Analysis

After three months of covering your beat, write an essay summarizing your findings. What has the main news been from your beat *across* the media thus far in 2011? Take a broad view of what you have read and heard and seen, and comment on the implications for that beat and the media you have observed.

Think like a writer: what must a reporter in this beat know and do?

- Discuss how the beat has been covered, detailing a method by which someone might follow your footsteps and cover this beat: what venues must a reporter in this subject follow, and how?
- Discuss what main questions reporters ask in this beat and how, according to your roll, they asked them: what people, places, events, etc do reporters in this beat cover?
- Talk with (and perhaps shadow) at least one reporter (local or beyond) who covers your beat to learn how he or she finds stories and makes decisions. Cite this reporter in your analysis.
- Explain the target audience for your beat and how various media make editorial decisions about how to reach that audience. Cite media kits and other explicit discussions of audience in your analysis.

Think like a critic: what is the history and future of this beat?

- Describe how your beat has changed since January: what trends and transitions have you noticed?
- Describe how you think the beat should change over the coming months or years: how must reporters in this beat adapt to changes in culture and media? What major feature pieces do you foresee writers pursuing relevant to this beat?

Your analysis should be thesis-driven: make an observational or critical claim about the beat itself. Support your thesis with evidence from your own beat roll (use footnotes or in-text citation and include a full Works Cited list) and other sources (reporter interview, media kits, etc). Craft a title that reflects your argument.

Write 4-5 double-spaced pages (not including the Works Cited list) and email it to me (as a Microsoft Word or iWorks Pages document) by 2 pm Monday, April 18. Your grade will reflect your claim (is it compelling?), evidence (is it thorough?), and composition (is it well-written?).