

Writing an Investigative Profile

Why are we doing this?

My goal is for you to apply your knowledge of public records, basic journalism practices and writing techniques to write an in-depth, investigative profile about a public official in Florida. Your goal is to find out their views on urbanization and any plans they have for their communities. Your profile should answer the question, “What are this person’s views of urbanization?” Through your profile, you should reveal why this person is newsworthy in their community, how they shape local policy and if they have any major plans for that community.

What will I be writing?

- You will be writing a 3 to 5-page profile on a local or state politician. Your job is to tell the reader why this person is important. You should rely mostly on public records, research and direct interviews to answer your questions. In fact, in some cases you may never speak directly to your subject, although I encourage you to try and contact them (you should be able to find a phone number or e-mail address through your public records searches).
- Your profile should be written in a news-feature style with an engaging lead that draws the reader into your profile. This is not a typical profile and will require you to conduct interviews in a timely manner and maintain an information database in a well organized fashion. This is not an editorial, column, letter to the editor, first-person narrative, essay, report or term paper. No more than two students may write about the same official.
- Your profile should be written with a target publication in mind. Ask yourself, "Is this profile appropriate for the local paper or a newspaper that covers statewide issues on a larger scale?" Locally, *The Alligator* and the Campus Edition of *The Gainesville Sun* are your best options, and often community and weekly papers are great options. While your profile may be appropriate for large dailies like *The Orlando Sentinel* and *The Miami Herald*, it is important to remember how difficult it may be to get published in these papers
- I am asking you to conduct at least three live interviews with people other than your subject. **You may not interview your friends, family and work colleagues.** Your sources and/or your target publications should not constitute a journalistic conflict of interest. Some profiles may require more than the basic number of interviews. Try to conduct your interviews in person. Phone interviews are Okay if a face-to-face interview cannot be arranged. **E-mail interviews may be used as a last resort.** You will turn in a list of sources with their phone numbers and e-mail addresses.

- To help prepare for your interviews, you should conduct some background information on your subject. I recommend newspapers and/or local magazines to find out their voting record on issues affecting urbanization and other information. You will turn in your background research notes.

What is your timeline?

- Due, by e-mail, before March 26:
 - The subject of your profile,
 - The focus of your profile (what angle of the person's life will you write about or their views on urbanization),
 - Several questions you need to get answered through your interviews,
 - Target publication,
 - Citation information on at least two background readings on your subject.

Ten points will be deducted from the final grade on the profile if you do not send the e-mail by the deadline. All subjects must be approved by me before you can proceed with your profile

- Due, by e-mail, by April 2:
 - The e-mail should repeat information from your first e-mail,
 - Provide a progress report on your profile, which must include having conducting at least one interview,
 - List the names, titles and other identifying information of people you are interviewing and several interview questions you are using.

Ten points will be deducted from the final grade on this profile if you do not send the e-mail by the deadline.

- Due, in hard copy format, by April 9:
 - A rough draft of your final profile free from grammatical and AP style errors,
 - Should include at least three sources,
 - Also include copies of your background research notes and a source list, including names, titles and contact information for your sources.

Ten points will be deducted from the final grade on this profile if you do not send the e-mail by the deadline.

- Due, in hard copy format, by April 18:
 - The final, typed profile, at the beginning of class, free from grammatical and AP style errors,
 - Must include at least three sources, but more are acceptable,
 - Include copies of your rough draft, interview notes, a source list, copies of any background information used and a list of potential publications.

Points will be deducted for errors in AP style, grammar, mechanics and stylistic mistakes.

- Before the end of the semester,

- Although publication is not mandatory for success in the course, it is our overall goal for each of your assignments.
- If any of your articles are published by the end of the semester you will receive at least 10 points, per assignment, extra credit.

Where to find help?

- To find background information on your subject, use an online search engine,
- To find public records on your subject, consult the *Florida Public Records Handbook*,
- To find sources and/or contacts on your subject, check the local phone book and/or online sources

How to use sources properly?

If you use the ideas or information from another writer/publication, you must give credit to that writer/publication, whether the source is a newspaper article, a Web site or a business brochure. To use another's wording or ideas without credit is plagiarism. Making up information or quotes is unacceptable. These offenses will result in a zero for the assignment. If you have questions about appropriate attribution, speak with me.

When to use reporter etiquette?

Being an effective student reporter includes following some guidelines:

- Be professionally assertive. If you phone or e-mail and don't receive a response in 24 hours, try again. If you e-mailed the first time, then call the next time. Contact the person's secretary to schedule an appointment. If you are trying to talk with a politician or professional, find out the person's office hours and check to see if an assistant could talk with you. Always, be prepared to find another source.
- Remember these people have jobs and aren't just on call for student reporters. You may be turned down by a source who is too busy or who recently has been interviewed on the same topic. Ask the person to recommend someone else you can interview.
- Be prepared – if you haven't done background research and don't have written interview questions, the source will consider you unprepared to do a good job with the profile.
- Dress professionally – consider how you will look to the person you are interviewing. Please don't wear baseball caps, skimpy clothing or T-shirts with suggestive wording.
- If you are trying to get your profile published, be professionally assertive but not overbearing or nagging. You may have to contact the editor several times. You are eager to be published, but you, as a freelance writer, are low on most editors' priorities. Don't whine or tell the editor that you've got to have the extra credit. If I receive a call from an editor saying that you have been too demanding, I will lower your assignment grade by at least two letter grades.