

Journalism 635: Statehouse Reporting  
Coordinator: Prof. Barbara Barnett  
By Appointment

About this course:

Welcome to the Statehouse Reporting course. This is a hands-on course that will help you gain real-world experience in reporting on politics and public affairs. You'll spend time in Topeka, and you'll write and produce multimedia news articles that we'll share with media outlets across the state. Your job is to be the eyes and ears for Kansas residents, telling them what lawmakers are doing at the state capitol.

Course goals:

In this course you'll learn how to:

- Develop and report breaking news stories.
- Develop and report enterprise stories.
- Help state residents understand how legislative actions impact their daily lives.
- Work with multiple sources to produce news reports that are accurate and fair.
- Report ethically.
- Think about journalism as a public service.

How the course works:

This course may differ from some others you've taken. We will not meet at regular times in a classroom, and we won't have a textbook. Your classroom will be the state capitol, and your textbook will be legislative bills, committee reports, and government and political websites.

We will work as a team producing multimedia stories about the 2016 legislative session. We will work as a news bureau, covering a variety of topics, and producing news stories for media outlets across the state.

Each of you have been given your assignments, based on your past experience and interests. For those of you working as reporters, you will write or produce news and feature stories that will be posted on the Kansas Press Association (KPA) website. KPA members will then be able to run those stories/videos/audios. Some of you will work with specific media outlets that have offices in the capitol building. Those reporters will ask you to cover events, and you'll write stories. All stories will be copyedited by your fellow classmates and by me.

Your responsibilities:

You will need to spend at least a half-day at the capitol each week. You may need to spend more time there to gather information for your articles.

Unless we've made a different arrangement, you will report two breaking news stories each week. (You are responsible for one news story the first week of class, then two news stories thereafter). If you are writing for print or online, the length of

the stories will vary, but aim for 350-500 words. You also will report four enterprise stories. These can be news features or in-depth explorations of issues that you touched on in news stories. The length of these stories can be up to 1,000 – 1,500 words. If you produce an audio or video report, this translates into two weekly news stories that are 30-60 seconds long and four enterprise reports that are 90 – 120 seconds long. See me for guidelines about photos and multimedia packages. If you are writing for print or online, you'll turn in your news story. If you are writing for audio or broadcast, you'll turn in your script.

My responsibilities in this class are to:

- To provide direction on story assignments.
- To provide constructive feedback on how well your story was reported and written.
- To help you find the best sources.
- To help you think creatively about how to present your stories to the public.

Your responsibilities:

- To develop story ideas based on legislative actions.
- To cultivate credible sources.
- To report accurately and ethically.
- To meet deadlines.
- To explain complex legislative action in simple terms.
- To help readers understand the legislative process and its impact on their lives.

Working together:

The legislature is action-packed. Something is always going on. So, we need to work efficiently to cover as many stories as we can. It's going to be important that we coordinate our work.

Each Monday, you'll send me two stories ideas for the week. These may change, but you want to have a game plan for the week. Your story ideas should contain a slug line (a one or two-word title for your story) and a short description. For example: VOTE KU – The state legislature will vote Tuesday to change the name of the University of Kansas to the University of Lawrence.

I'll discuss your ideas with you and approve the assignments.

I'll send the entire class a list of stories for the week.

You will need to file your daily news stories by 5 p.m. If you don't make the deadline, the story will be held to the next day, and you may be asked to do some additional reporting to find a new news angle.

One of the two class copyeditors will read your article or broadcast script. They may call or email you if they have questions. I will read your articles as well, and I may call you if I have questions.

I will post all edited articles on the KPA website. If you are working on an assignment for a newspaper or radio station, the class copyeditors and I will still read your assignment before you turn it in to them. That story also will be posted on the KPA website.

Communicating:

I've set up a Slack.com site to help us communicate. I'll post our weekly assignments there. You all should feel free to share story ideas with each other. You may not be able to cover a meeting, but maybe one of your classmates can.

To sign on to our Slack.com site, go to: [www.slack.com](http://www.slack.com). Log in with our name: statehouse2016.

The best way to reach me is by email or by cell phone: [barnettb@ku.edu](mailto:barnettb@ku.edu) or 785-218-9935.

I will contact you by email, but you should give me your cell phone number as well.

Grades and feedback:

I'll be working with you as you report and write your articles. Your article won't go on the KPA website unless it's ready for publication or broadcast.

What I'll do is give you feedback (a short email) each week on your work. Based on the criteria below, I'll let you know that these week's assignments were an A, or one story was an A, but one missed the point, so it was a C. I'll grade first drafts so make sure your first draft is your best draft.

Here's an idea of how assignments will be graded:

A – Story is clearly written in appropriate style. Story is accurate, balanced. Story includes multiple credible sources. There are no grammar and spelling mistakes. The story is ready for broadcast or publication.

B – Story is well-written. Student may need to do some additional reporting, but the facts are clearly presented, and the story is accurate and balanced. There may be some minor grammar or spelling errors. The story will be ready for publication or broadcast with minimal editing.

C – The story is not well-written and needs considerable revision. There is the need for additional reporting. The story needs additional sourcing. There are major

grammar and spelling errors. The story needs to be rewritten before it can be published or broadcast.

D – Back to the drawing board. The story needs complete rewriting or more reporting.

F – Major factual errors. Sloppy reporting. Poor sourcing. No attention to grammar and spelling.

Meetings: From time to time, we may need to meet one-on-one. Feel free to contact me if you need to set up a face-to-face meeting in my office or in Topeka.

How to get story ideas:

Something is always happening in the legislature, and there are lots of people making it happen: Lawmakers, legislative staff members, government employees, lobbyists, and, of course, citizens. The state House and Senate meet to introduce and debate bills, but much of the work is done in committees. Much of your breaking news coverage will focus on bills that are introduced and committee debates. Here are some ideas for getting started:

Check out the legislative home page: <http://www.kslegislature.org/li/>

This site gives you good background, but it also allows you to search bills that have been introduced. You can search by bill number or you can search by keyword.

Click on the “committees” tab to learn about the house and senate committees, as well as joint committee. If you click on the names of individual committees (for example, “agriculture,”) you can learn what times the committee meets. You also can learn which bills have been assigned to which committees, and which legislators serve on committees.

Click on the “bills and laws” tab to learn about the status of any bill.

Click on the “calendar” tab to learn what’s happening each day in the house and senate.

There is a separate webpage for the state house. Check it out here:

[http://www.kslegislature.org/li/b2015\\_16/chamber/house/](http://www.kslegislature.org/li/b2015_16/chamber/house/)

This provides information about each legislator, which committees they serve on, their office and phone numbers. It gives you names and numbers of the house speaker and speaker pro-tem.

Check out the state senate webpage:

[http://www.kslegislature.org/li/b2015\\_16/chamber/senate/](http://www.kslegislature.org/li/b2015_16/chamber/senate/)

You may want to take a look at the homepage of Gov. Sam Brownback:

<https://www.governor.ks.gov/home>

Sources:

Each legislative body has a public relations office. Contact information for them is:

For the Senate, contact:

Paje Resner

Director of Policy and Communication

Office of the Senate President

State Capitol, Room 430-E

Phone: 785-296-3763

Cell: 785-608-5399

Email: [paje.resner@senate.ks.gov](mailto:paje.resner@senate.ks.gov)

For the House, contact:

Rachel Whitten

Director of Communications

Kansas House of Representatives

(785) 296-5794

[rachel.whitten@house.ks.gov](mailto:rachel.whitten@house.ks.gov)

Eileen Hawley

Director of Communications/ Press Secretary

Governor's office

785-368-7138

Cell: 785-213-9520

Email: [Eileen.hawley@ks.gov](mailto:Eileen.hawley@ks.gov)

[media@ks.gov](mailto:media@ks.gov)

You will frequently hear people in the legislature talk about “legislative staff” or “legislative analysts” or “policy analysts.” These people are on the staff of the Kansas Legislative Research Department. These people are fantastic sources of information. They can explain in plain everyday language the content of a bill, what it will do, its impact. Each legislative committee has a research staff person assigned to work with lawmakers, and these research staffers have expertise in specific areas. You can learn more about them by going to this webpage: [www.kslegilsature.org/klrd](http://www.kslegilsature.org/klrd)

Or you can find them here: <http://www.kslegislature.org/li/research/contact/>

Lobbyists can help you. You can find a list here: [http://www.kssos.org/elections/elections\\_lobbyists.html](http://www.kssos.org/elections/elections_lobbyists.html)

Don't forget that state agencies may also be helpful: <http://www.kansas.gov/agencies/>

Story ideas:

- Preview stories—What's going to happen?
- Daily stories – What happened at a meeting or during a legislative session? What does it mean? What will happen next?
- Follow-up stories—What it means, what will happen next?
- Profile stories – Who makes the legislature run? You might think of profiles of lawmakers, lobbyists, staff people (don't forget those who do “invisible work,” including administrative assistants, janitors).
- Regional stories – how does this affect west Kansas, urban areas, rural areas?
- Groups – how does legislation affect particular groups, older people, rural residents, students?