

## **Developing a Course in Journalistic Writing for NUFS Students**

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Journalistic writing is a recently-introduced course which third-year students have the option of selecting. The course is one of several writing classes students may choose from in the Department for British and American Studies (DBAS) of Nagoya University of Foreign Studies (NUFS). This paper outlines the background to the course development, the content of the course itself, and the outcomes from the first year of its introduction. In addition, the future development of the course is discussed.

### **1. Course context**

Previously, English writing courses for third-year NUFS students focused only on academic writing. However, from the 2019/20 academic year, students were given a choice of several writing styles. As well as academic writing, these included thesis writing, business writing, creative writing, and the focus of this paper: journalistic writing. The aim was to increase student motivation for writing by giving them more control over which style they attempted, and also to expose students to a greater range of writing techniques.

NUFS students have had some limited opportunities to engage with journalism. There is a newspaper club which since 2018 has produced an English language paper called *The NUS Times* (Chunichi Shimbun, 2018). There was also a *Japan Times* exhibition held at the university in 2019, which displayed editions of the paper dating back to its founding in 1897 (Kojima, 2019). Nevertheless, becoming a journalist is clearly not a common goal of those attending this university, illustrated by the fact that none of the 34 students who took this new course indicated that was their intended career path.

However, there are several reasons why the course can still be of great benefit to NUS students. First, there is evidence that there are motivational benefits to having more choice of what one writes about and studies (Anderson, 2016). It is self-evident that students who are able to select their own topics and sample different writing styles are more likely to enjoy the process than those cornered for four years into the strict framework of academic writing. It has also been argued that the specific skills learned by doing journalistic writing can benefit individuals besides those who wish to make it their career. Being able to write news stories will “benefit them (students) all of their lives, whether or not they decide to make a living as a journalist” according to Climenhaga (2009, p. 4), while Hanna (in Grundy et al., 2012) similarly makes the case that “universities are essential in the transmission of the skills and public service values of investigative journalism” (p. 168). Writing news articles and composing an investigative piece comprise the two most important projects of the course implemented, with each serving as the main, final project of each semester. Clearly some of the other projects undertaken, such as writing a blog, a review, or an opinion piece, would have applications that the students could utilise in their everyday lives both when using social media or consuming English-language news. A sceptic may suggest that given the students are unlikely to be able to produce high-quality journalistic writing in Japanese, let alone in English, the course has

little value apart from novelty. However, I would counter such assertions by quoting Synge (2010), who argues that “just because your English isn’t perfect, it doesn’t mean that you won’t make a good journalist” (p. 58–59).

One can also make the case that studying and practising journalism has a wider significance than just the practical skills that can be acquired. It is no exaggeration to say that journalism is in a state of crisis. Media organisations have reacted to the digital revolution by either embracing it, partly adapting to it, or completely ignoring it. Whatever each organisation has tried, it has resulted in the decline of the industry as people refuse to now pay to consume news they can just as easily get online for free (Curran in Franklin, 2011; Fowler, 2015). With less money in journalism, there has been a rise in fake news, as media with less time and money to invest in in-depth coverage inadequately investigate stories before reporting them, or citizen journalism allows the general public to post stories online and spread them almost at will. The accuracy of news has decreased, and so too has public trust in the media, which has dropped to all-time lows (Ingram, 2018; Meade, 2018). It has therefore become the responsibility of every educated citizen to be able to disseminate fact from fiction, and that requires some studying of journalism itself. Kovach and Rosentiel (2014) are two who argue for this kind of education in journalism for all. As they put it, “the first step...has to be developing a means of letting those who made up that market finally see how the sausage is made - how do we do our work and what informs our decisions” (p. 292). This may be even more important for Japanese students. The news in Japan is heavily managed through its “press clubs”, with news almost always coming directly from official sources, and only shared with those who are members of these clubs (Hargreaves, 2014). Despite this, there is a lack of knowledge among many Japanese people about how their media functions compared with other countries, and so once more education on how journalism is *supposed* to work could be of great benefit.

Of course, I am not so arrogant as to believe a two-semester course in Journalistic Writing can somehow help to spark a revolution in which the Japanese public become more active in how they scrutinise the news. Nevertheless, I believe engaging in such a course can allow participants to become better writers, consumers, and critics of the news media. After all, my own degree in Journalism acquired from the University of Stirling did that for me.

## **2. Objectives**

1. This course aims to introduce the students to a variety of styles of journalistic writing, focusing especially on those that they themselves may find useful or be exposed to in their daily lives. To this end, they will produce six different works of journalistic writing over the course of two semesters.
2. The students will also be educated more widely in the field of journalism, including the introduction of commonly-used journalistic terminology.
3. The course aims to motivate the students by giving them more control over the topics they choose to write about, and by allowing them to work both individually and collaboratively on different projects.

## **3. Course content**

### **3.1 Structure**

The course is divided into two one-semester courses, each of which follows the same basic structure. The semester starts with two introductory lessons which establish a foundation for the students by studying key terminology (e.g. reporter, bias, media), basic journalistic concepts (e.g. objectivity vs. subjectivity) and an overview of the various types of journalistic writing.

Each semester has three projects for the students to complete. The first two

projects are smaller, requiring just 400 words for each, while the final project is partly collaborative and requires about 800 words from each student. These word lengths are typical of articles in journalism (Synge, 2010). As with most writing courses at NUFS, the students produce three drafts for each paper, with the first draft being peer reviewed, the second being checked by the teacher, and the final draft being the one that is graded. This is also representative of the number of drafts produced when professional journalists write their stories (Synge, 2010). The basic course structure is illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1**

<b>Semester 1</b>	
Lessons 1–2: <b>Introduction to Journalistic Writing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• key vocabulary</li> <li>• journalistic writing styles</li> </ul>
Lessons 3–5: <b>Project 1 - Interview</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• work individually</li> <li>• about 400 words</li> <li>• worth 20% of final grade</li> </ul>
Lessons 6–8: <b>Project 2 - Blog</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• work individually</li> <li>• about 400 words</li> <li>• worth 20% of final grade</li> </ul>
Lessons 9–14: <b>Project 3 - News Articles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• work both individually and collaboratively</li> <li>• about 800 words</li> <li>• worth 40% of final grade</li> </ul>
Lesson 15: <b>Review</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• course review and feedback</li> </ul>
<b>Semester 2</b>	
Lessons 1–2: <b>Introduction to Journalistic Writing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• key vocabulary</li> <li>• journalistic writing styles</li> </ul>
Lessons 3–5: <b>Project 1 - Review</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• work individually</li> <li>• about 400 words</li> <li>• worth 20% of final grade</li> </ul>
Lessons 6–8: <b>Project 2 - Opinion Piece</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• work individually</li> <li>• about 400 words</li> <li>• worth 20% of final grade</li> </ul>
Lessons 9–14: <b>Project 3 - Investigative Piece</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• work both individually and collaboratively</li> <li>• about 400 words</li> <li>• worth 40% of final grade</li> </ul>
Lesson 15: <b>Review</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• course review and feedback</li> </ul>

## **3.2 Projects**

All of the projects started with a lesson introducing the area of focus and related terminology, followed by a class on how to write in that journalistic style, and then the undertaking of the project itself. The first drafts were due in the third lesson, in which peer review was conducted, then the second drafts a week later, before the final drafts would be due two weeks after that (as the week in between had the teacher returning the students' edited second drafts).

### **3.2.1 Interview**

Interviewing, “one of the key tasks of journalism” (Climenhaga, 2009, p. 126), was the first project. It was chosen to be first because being able to conduct an interview would be a useful skill for students in later projects as well, and it was considered a fairly gentle introduction to journalistic writing as interviews tend to be something the students have done before. Interview writing usually has a specific structure, with the writing alternating between direct or indirect quotes (direct are preferable) and contextual information or interviewer observations. The students were given a written example of an interview write-up and asked to find someone interesting to conduct an interview with. One complication was whether to allow the students to do the interview in Japanese or not. In the end, I compromised and said that the interview should be done in English, but that if the interviewee could not understand a question, then some Japanese would be allowed. Directions on how to conduct and write an interview were based on the advice of Climenhaga (2009) and Smith (2010). This included instructions such as doing research on the interviewee or topic beforehand, starting the interview with an easy question, recording the interview (with permission), taking notes during the interview and starting and ending the interview write-up with the most interesting quotes from the interviewee.

### 3.2.2 Blog

Given that so many journalists now blog both on microblogging sites like *Twitter*, more in-depth blog sites like *WordPress*, or their news sites' own web page, this was the project perhaps most relevant to the students' everyday lives. Journalists now routinely use *Twitter* in particular (Bossio, 2017; Hermida in Franklin, 2011), and this has also led to a more personalised style of journalistic reporting. It was decided that the students would do a more personal blog, rather than one reporting on news, for this writing project. This was done to prevent too much overlap with the news articles writing style, but also because it allows for more detailed writing. It is also true that journalism also covers personal feature articles, under which blogging would fall.

The students were shown blogs on *WordPress* to illustrate how they should be written. Unlike many of the other writing projects, a great deal of flexibility was allowed in terms of writing style and content, as blogs come in a variety of shapes and sizes. The students had the option of writing a personal diary-style blog, or a piece of writing about something they have an interest in or are an expert on. The students were also required to write a comment on three other students' blogs. This was to simulate the real-life comments many bloggers receive when they post.

### 3.2.3 News Articles

The news articles project had the students working in groups of three or four. In these groups, the students had to produce a short newspaper, with each student responsible for one page, and three articles on each page. Two of each page's articles would be about 200 words in length, while the third would be the main article at around 400 words, for a total of approximately 800 words. They were also required to have a picture with a caption on each page.

The students were taught about the **Inverted Pyramid**, which is almost always the recommended structure for news articles (Climenhaga, 2009; Grundy et al., 2012; Smith, 2010). This involves starting with the most important information; what happened, who was involved, where and when it happened, how it happened, and why it happened; before continuing with progressively less important details of the story. Short paragraphs are common, and presentation should aim most of all for clarity, accuracy and conciseness (Smith, 2010).

The collaborative part of the project had two elements. First, the students had to decide together what type of newspaper they were producing. For example, would all the articles be about local and NUFS-related news, or would this instead focus on national and international news? Second, the students had to decide together what topics each of their pages would have. It was a requirement to have the first page containing headline news, but the other two or three pages could be on entertainment, politics, sports, or any other type of news that is commonly produced in newspapers. However, it was a further requirement that all articles be **hard news**, meaning that the stories must be related to current, recent or upcoming events (Climenhaga, 2009). This was done to prevent overlap with writing styles practised in other projects.

### 3.2.4 Review

Online reviews can have enormous influence on consumers. Reviews on sites like *TripAdvisor*, *RottenTomatoes* and *Amazon* can be the difference between success and failure for a business or publication. According to a 2016 survey, 97% of customers take online reviews into account before buying something (Fan & Fuel, 2017). Moreover, the survey results also show that consumers overwhelmingly read reviews in detail rather than just relying on the overall aggregated score. Some 94% of respondents said they read online reviews rather than just check ratings, while 73% said detailed reviews had more impact on



their view of the product or company than their aggregated score (Fan & Fuel, 2017). Finally, underlining the impact even one review can have, 35% said that just one negative review could persuade them not to buy a product or service (Fan & Fuel, 2017).

With all this in mind, the project of writing a review was one of the most relevant to the students. Since a review needs to be both informative and evaluative (Synge, 2010), students were encouraged to prioritise both in their writing. The students could choose to review any type of product or service, but film reviews proved to be the most popular. Other products reviewed included a women-only hotel, five types of bottled green tea, and the album of an alternative rock band. The students were encouraged to review something that was new for them, rather than a familiar item such as a film they had already seen several times. It was also recommended not to choose something they were already a fan of. Although the structure of the review could be somewhat flexible, the students had to include a star rating (out of five) for the item, their overall opinion, justification for their view and sufficient information on the item without revealing spoilers.

### **3.2.5 Opinion Piece**

People express their opinion in written form all the time. This is now mostly done concisely via online media such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*, but being able to present one's view persuasively and eloquently in English is still of value. The journalistic opinion piece is of course more detailed than a person's *Twitter* outburst, but both share a similarity in strength of feeling. Opinion writers tend not to shrink from controversial topics or views; in fact, these are often preferred (Synge, 2010). The goal is to stir up debate as much as persuade the reader that your view is the correct one.

The opinion piece (op-ed) project, therefore, encouraged students to choose

a topic in which their opinion went against the perceived majority view. The justification for the writer's opinion should be a mix of both factual and emotional reasoning. The style should also reflect the writer (Synge, 2010), so less instruction was given in exactly how the piece should be written, although again the students were provided with example op-eds. The views expressed by students were for the most part appropriately strong, including that there is a bias in all aspects of Japanese society toward good-looking people, that cram schools should be abolished, and that those over the age of 65 should be banned from driving.

### **3.2.6 Investigative Piece**

Arguing the case that being able to do investigative writing is relevant to Japanese university students not studying journalism is less easy than it is for review or blog writing. However, investigative journalism is, I would argue, extremely important for any democracy, and so what it lacks in practical relevance it makes up for in potential impact. As Diane Dakers (2018) puts it “investigative journalism is a critical component to the freedom of expression”. This type of journalism is a check on the rich and powerful in society, and has played a major role in bringing down all kinds of corrupt elites from Presidents (e.g. Nixon) to major corporations (e.g. Enron). With the various financial issues facing news media already mentioned, investigative journalism has been one the areas to suffer the most. The practice requires a great amount of resources with no guarantee of uncovering something significant, and often requires months or even years of research before producing results, so many media organizations have scaled back their funding for investigative journalism (de Burgh, 2008). Nevertheless, it is exactly this kind of detailed research that can allow students to question more, learn more and uncover more about the people and institutions that control many aspects of their lives.

Given the potential legal implications of investigating celebrities or major companies, the students were discouraged from doing that kind of investigation. To ensure the students could do an appropriate investigation without getting themselves into trouble, a choice of research topics was given for them to choose from. These included an investigation into food packaging standards in Japan and around the world, a survey to identify any gender differences or similarities in views on romantic relationships, and research into whether people base their views on other countries' people mostly on stereotypes, factual evidence, or personal experience. The students did their investigation in groups of three or four, with each member choosing a different aspect of their chosen topic to write about. For example, having done a survey of 100 students with respect to their views on romantic relationships, one student might write an overall summary of the results, another might interview two students with opposing views and write about their responses in greater depth, the third member may look at how the views expressed compare with historical views and the final person could contrast the results with similar surveys undertaken in other countries. Although some overlap was allowed between the articles, the students were encouraged to compare their articles to ensure they each presented different information which supported and complemented the main investigation.

### **3.3 Additional content**

Additional activities were occasionally added to lessons in order to break up the course and provide greater variety. These included a “fact vs opinion” activity, inspired by the one proposed by Smith (2010). In this activity, the students are given a list of sentences, and have to identify which are stating facts and which are opinion, or whether any are a mix of the two. This is followed by discussion questions. I also created a “real or fake news?” PowerPoint, which allowed the students to try and decipher whether each news story presented was true or fictional. The students were then encouraged themselves to research two

unbelievable-but-true news stories, as well as create one of their own which is completely false. They then presented these stories to their group members, who after an interrogation could guess which story was false. Finally, there was an activity introducing journalistic ethics to the students, and a review quiz.

### **3.4 Grading**

There was a different rubric for each project, although certain aspects remained consistent for each. One of these was grammar and vocabulary, with 20% of their score allocated for this in all projects. As with other forms of writing, accurate use of words and syntax is important in journalistic writing (Grundy et al., 2012). Research, involving the use of relevant sources and their correct presentation in the writing, also represented 20% of the overall score in all projects but one. This is again a key part of journalistic writing (Synge, 2010). The exception was the blog project, which instead allocated this 20% to the comments written by students on the blogs of others in the class, since research need not be an essential part of good blog writing. Another fifth of the overall grade was assigned to writing style. Since the style of writing varied depending on the project, this just meant that their style and formatting was appropriate for that particular form of journalistic writing. Content took up another 20% of the total score, with “collaboration” being added as a supplementary part of this segment for the news article and investigating writing projects. The final fifth of the student’s grades was allocated to formatting, title and structure.

## **4. Outcomes**

Some quantifiable data was taken after the first implementation of this course. The main source of useful data on the students’ impression of the course could be seen in the feedback forms they completed at the end of the semester. Compared with those who took the previous advanced writing course the year before, almost all questions received an increase in positive responses. Table 2 illustrates the

**Table 2**

<b>Survey statement</b>	<b>Average of student responses in 2018–19 Advanced Writing class</b>	<b>Average of student responses in 2019–20 Journalistic Writing class</b>
<b>I'm satisfied with the class overall.</b>	4.4	4.4
<b>I tried to attend this class every time.</b>	3.3	4.0
<b>I attended this class with passion.</b>	4.3	4.5
<b>I was able to do writing more actively because of this class.</b>	4.4	4.6
<b>This class was very interesting.</b>	4.2	4.4
<b>Through this class, my English abilities improved.</b>	4.3	4.5

responses of students to some of the questions on the feedback questionnaire, with 5 indicating a statement was completely true, 1 completely untrue, and 2–4 the varying levels in between. There were 24 students who responded to the survey in the 2018–19 class, and 27 who answered from the 2019–20 class. All of the statements were originally written in Japanese, and have been translated.

These descriptive statistics show there was a small increase in student satisfaction in all categories. The greatest rise was in the students' motivation to attend class, while the only statement not to record an increase was overall satisfaction with the course, which remained unchanged but still high at 4.4. The high average of responses suggests the students were happy with the course and their learning from it, and were marginally more fulfilled than they were for the 2018–19 course. It is worth noting that since the maximum score was 5 for each question, very high increases were impossible as most of the averages were already above 4 for the course the year before. Therefore, even small increases indicate there was some significant improvement in student satisfaction. The

survey did not ask the students to give reasons for their answers, so it is unclear whether the rise was caused by the ability of students to choose the writing course themselves, the content of the course, or other factors.

As well as the survey results, intuitive analysis of the student reactions to the class showed a clear preference for it over the previous one in academic writing, and the same conclusion was made by the other teacher of this course, David Townsend. The students actively engaged with the topics in many of the projects, and the classes were more active with greater discussion. Moreover, the work produced was often of a surprisingly high standard. The op-eds and blogs in particular were frequently written very effectively. The news articles and investigative pieces presented the greatest challenges for the students, and the quality of the writing varied significantly. Nevertheless, it is necessary for the students to be challenged into writing outside of their comfort zone. As with all forms of writing, the students that applied themselves the most produced the best work.

The course can also be evaluated to some extent from the work the students produced. All of the students were able to complete every project, and thus no students failed the class in either semester. This is in contrast to the academic writing course I taught third-year students the year before. Moreover, the students were asked at the end of the course to discuss their thoughts on each of the projects undertaken. Most students identified review and blog writing as their favourite projects, and investigative and news articles as their least preferred. This was perhaps to be expected as the latter two required the greatest amount of work, and reviews and blogs are the two that students identified that they interact with the most in their daily lives.

Some areas of the course could be improved. One is to make the blogs online instead of just printing out drafts from Microsoft Word. This would give the

students an opportunity to write a blog that they could continue if they wished to after the conclusion of the course. Therefore, *WordPress* will be used by the students to write their blogs from the 2020/21 academic year. Second, a textbook for the course would be of more benefit than the various handouts currently given to the students over the course period. Since this will not be possible for at least a year, in the short-term all documents for the course will be made available online in order to reduce the number of individual papers required. Finally, some collaboration with the *NUFS Times* for the news article project, with the potential of some student articles being published in the paper, may increase the feeling of achievement for some students.

Going forward, the course will need to be updated each year to stay current, as journalism is constantly evolving. There is also the possibility for further research on the effectiveness of the course, and at the end of the second year since its introduction I will conduct more in-depth surveys of student views of the program. Teacher feedback on the course is also ongoing and extremely useful, and it is hoped that this paper may result in more of it. It is my belief that this change in the third-year writing program to include various elective styles of writing can be very beneficial to the students, both in terms of their enjoyment of the process and the applicable skills acquired.

### **Acknowledgement**

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