

History and Principles of Journalism

JO 150 Spring 2026

Ta-Nehisi Coates
is the author of
Between the World and Me



This course deals with the events, institutions and individuals that have shaped journalism in this country.

Each time we meet, I'll have stories to tell. On your own, you will read three books. Three times during the term, we will have exams.

The secret to success in this class comes in showing up. So roll out of bed and come to class to learn about your legacy.

Here's a chance to find out about the role the press has played in our history.

The history of this country is the history of journalism. This is *your* story.

Required:

- Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (Spiegel and Grau, 2015)
- Jodi Kantor and Meghan Twohey, *Chasing the Truth* (Philomel, 2022)

Professor **William McKeen**

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- Clarissa Ward, *On All Fronts* (Penguin, 2020)

Boston University provides students with subscriptions to *The New York Times* and *The Boston Globe*. Read them daily. Journalists *must* read.

Be sure to check Blackboard frequently.

I hope you have a swell time in the course. I know I will.

Grading and related issues

We have three tests and one short essay. Since there is no textbook, you should conclude that attendance at the lectures is vital to success in the course.

The tests will have 30 questions from the lectures and five questions from the reading. Your final grade is determined by your performance on the tests and the quality of your essay.

Do not talk, dance or make rude noises during class. Disruptive behavior damages your grade.

We follow the College of Communication grading scale at right.

A	94-100
A-	90-93.99
B+	87-89.99
B	83-86.99
B-	80-82.99
C+	77-79.99
C	73-76.99
C-	70-72.99
D	60-69.99
F	0-59.99

Attendance

Attendance is critical. Come to class fully prepared. Be caught up on the readings. Be well informed.

If you don't show up, the quality of class is diminished. Remember your John Donne (and, of course, remove the gender bias from this centuries-old quote):

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less.... (A)ny man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

In short, don't be a clod. But do be polite. There's no excuse for rudeness.

You will not be allowed to make up any missed work unless the reason for your absence is extremely grave (a death in the family or perhaps the contraction of some loathsome disease), and you call or email me *before* the class period to be missed.

I have strong feelings about attendance. It would be stupid to walk into Trader Joe's, fill your cart with yummy groceries, pay for the stuff, then tell the cashier, "Naw, you keep it." Yet that's what we often do in college. As Herman B (no period) Wells,

Learning objectives

Students will:

- Develop an awareness and appreciation of the foundations of journalism in a free society
- Develop an awareness of the the role of journalism in modern society
- Develop an appreciation of key journalists, works of journalism and institutions in our history
- Develop an understanding of journalism's legacy in a free society.

chancellor of Indiana University (my beloved alma mater) once said: "Education is the one thing people pay for then do not insist upon receiving."

Your essay on history and principles

You will write a short essay, due April 17, on your understanding of journalism's role in society.

The essay should be a statement of your perception of journalism's role in our society. It should offer several concrete examples drawn from my talks in class and from your readings.

The primary concern is the function of journalism – what it does, what it is intended to do and how has it used and abused.

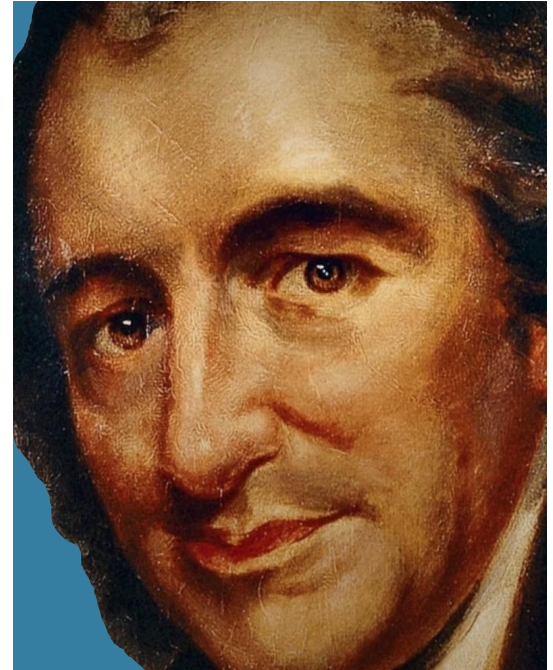
If you attend class regularly, you should have a wealth of examples, drawn from my talks.

There is no formula for this essay. We are impressed by initiative and creativity. You have those things, so use them.

Though the essay will be turned in via email as an attachment – please, no Google docs or shared drives; my laptop is so old it is steam-powered – think of it as something in this range: 2-3 pages or 750 words (minimum). Please double space.

Here are answers to questions you might ask about this essay.

- **Style.** Consistency is what matters most to me. Essays and research papers generally follow the style outlined in *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations* by Kate Turabian. This is a handy thing to have but you don't need to rush out and buy it. As long as you are consistent and give me bibliographical information, I will be delighted. Some of you may be learning Associated Press Style. Use that if you want. It will be good practice.
- **Citation.** Follow the simple practice of indicating a citation with a superior number. Then, put all your notes at the end. I prefer that book citations follow the format under the required-texts section of this syllabus. Cite interviews with a superior number and include all relevant information in the endnote. Thus: 47. *Wanda Jackson, telephone interview, June 8, 2026.*



Thomas Paine wrote *Common Sense*, *The American Crisis* and *The Rights of Man*.

You'll notice that every class is titled, so when you use me for a citation, follow this format: 36. *William McKeen, "The Children's Crusade," JO 150 History and Principles of Journalism (Boston University) March 28, 2026.*

- **Format.** Number your pages. Put this sort of stuff at the top of your first page: name (you'd be surprised how many people forget this), your email address, JO 150 and the date. Put it all on one line if you want.
- **Errors.** Spelling and grammar errors hurt. Work with care. This is the Boston University Department of Journalism and we expect your work to be of the highest quality. Errors of fact seriously damage your grade. For example: my name. If you don't capitalize the K in my last name, that's an error of fact. So: McKeen (cool), Mckeen (not cool)
- **Quality.** One last, vital thing: Do not think of this as "another boring essay." It must be interesting. Do your best work.

"Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time. Remember this in moments of despair. If you find that writing is hard, it's because it is hard."

WILLIAM ZINSSER

Reporters in the fictional world

A starter list of films worth studying

It could be that your essay on history and principles forms deal in part with how journalism has been portrayed in short stories, novels, television programs and films.

This is of interest to us because consumers of news often form their opinions of us – gatherers of news – from what they see in the fictional world. Let's consider the fictional world of motion pictures and how reporters are portrayed in movies.

It's worth watching these films not just for entertainment, but for what lessons might be drawn from these portrayals. What assumptions do you think civilians – non-journalists – might draw from these films.

This makes clear that we need to work with greater transparency.

This list is far from a complete list. Most of these can easily be found on streaming services. There are so many movies about journalism. Here are just a few.

Superman (2025). Our favorite superhero has a day job as a reporter. Directed by James Gunn.

She Said (2022). Two *New York Times* reporters investigate sexual harassment and assault. Directed by Maria Schrader.

The Post (2017). The *Washington Post* faces crises while publishing secret government documents. Directed by Steven Spielberg.

Shock and Awe (2017). About the reporting (and errors in reporting) the early days of the war in Iraq. Directed by Rob Reiner

Spotlight (2015). The *Boston Globe* investigates sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. Directed by Tom McCarthy.

Truth (2015). A *60 Minutes* report investigating President George W. Bush's military service comes under fire. Directed by James Vanderbilt.



Rachel McAdams in *Spotlight*.

The Paper (1994). Twenty-four hours in the life of a New York City tabloid. Directed by Ron Howard.

Broadcast News (1987). A love triangle amid the slew of newsroom compromises. Directed by James L. Brooks.

Under Fire (1983). Three reporters run for their lives during the last days of a corrupt regime in Nicaragua. By Roger Spottiswoode.

Absence of Malice (1981). Sloppy reporting leads to a libel suit and an inappropriate relationship between a reporter and a source. Directed by Sydney Pollack.

Network (1976). A network anchorman announces he will commit suicide on live television. Directed by Sidney Lumet.

All the President's Men (1976). The *Washington Post* investigates the Nixon White House. Directed by Alan J. Pakula.

The Parallax View (1973). An investigative reporter looks into a political conspiracy. Directed by Alan J. Pakula.

Citizen Kane (1941). A spoiled rich kid becomes a media mogul. Directed by Orson Welles.

His Girl Friday (1940). An editor and his ace reporter (who is also his former wife) hide a fugitive from the police. Directed by Howard Hawks.

Course outline

Oh, the places we'll go

There are three tests, with most of the questions coming from the lecturers outlined below. If you miss a class, get the notes from a fellow student or from the recordings preserved on Blackboard.

Here are the required books:

- *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates
- *Chasing the Truth* by Jodi Kantor and Meghan Twohey
- *On All Fronts* by Clarissa Ward

Tests are multiple-choice. Thirty questions come from the lectures and five questions from the book for that section of the course.

Each test covers a different book. These are unit tests. *We do not have a cumulative final examination.*

I have a journalism bibliography at the Courses tab of my website. Use it as a starter list for building a journalism library.



Jodi Kantor (left) and **Megan Twohey** of the *New York Times* listen to the newsroom announcement of their Pulitzer Prize. They are the authors of *Chasing the Truth*.

Section I

THE COMPANION BOOK FOR THE FIRST SECTION IS CHASING THE TRUTH BY JODI KANTOR AND MEGAN TWOHEY. THOSE JOURNALISTS SERVE AS EXCELLENT ROLE MODELS FOR YOU.

Chapter 1: **The Best of Times, the Worst of Times**

In this section we focus on some of the greatest moments in the history of American journalism, balanced by a few dark hours. Some of our stories: Truly a Great Dane; Josiah was a Smelly Cat; The Early Rumblings of the Adversary Press; Miss Tarbarrel; Would You Like Fries With That Rat?; Mucking About; The Muck Stops Here (Or Does It?); Fervent Idealists Teetering on the Brink of Righteousness; Heroes Schmeroes.

continued

Course outline continued

Chapter 2: **Disturbers of the Peace**

This chapter focuses on the creators of the flame and keepers of the flame and some other kinds of heroes. These are the pioneers who invented American journalism and represent the best of that breed, the independent, autonomous journalist. Here is a roll call of some of the fine people we will meet: Benjamin Harris; James and Benjamin Franklin; John Peter Zenger; Andrew Hamilton; Thomas Paine; Cassius Clay; Susan B. Anthony; William Allen White; Hodding Carter; H.L. Mencken; Frederick Douglass; Tom Gish; Frosty Troy; George Seldes; and Ida B. Wells. (If only we had Shecky Greene, it would be a perfect course of study.)

- TEST AT THE END OF CHAPTER TWO. THERE WILL BE 30 MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS FROM MY TALKS AND FIVE SUCH QUESTIONS FROM THE BOOK. TENTATIVE DATE: MID-FEBRUARY.

Section II

THE COMPANION BOOK FOR THIS SECTION IS ON ALL FRONTS BY CLARISSA WARD. IT'S A MEMOIR OF HER CAREER AS A WAR CORRESPONDENT.

Chapter 3: **Common Denominators**

In this chapter, we focus on sensationalism, from colonial times to the present. You'll run into a lot of familiar names: Pulitzer, Hearst and Murdoch, to name a few scoundrels. We will also discover that with the bad came some good – some enormous good.

Chapter 4: **Wars and Peace**

One of the values we use in deciding what is news is "conflict." We tend to think of wars, so naturally, this chapter shows the press at tumultuous times. However, there are other sorts of conflict – domestic wars, we call them – worth study. We will focus on the American wars in which the press played a significant role: the Revolution, the Civil War, the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, the Vietnam War and the Endless War of today. We will also discuss how the press covered the domestic wars – the struggle of survival during the Great Depression and the battles for human rights during the ongoing civil rights movement.

- TEST AT THE END OF CHAPTER FOUR. THERE WILL BE 30 MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS FROM MY TALKS AND FIVE SUCH QUESTIONS FROM THE BOOK. TENTATIVE DATE: END OF MARCH.

continued

Course outline continued

Section III

THE COMPANION BOOK FOR THE FINAL SECTION OF THE COURSE IS BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME BY TANEHISI COATES, HIS DISSECTION OF TODAY'S SOCIETY.

Chapter 5: Empires

This chapter is devoted to individual histories of several media empires, including the New York Times, CBS News, the Saturday Evening Post, the New Yorker, the Washington Post, Rolling Stone, Life magazine, Time magazine and the Los Angeles Times.

Chapter 6: The Honor Roll

The circle is unbroken. We use this last chapter to celebrate some of the greatest members our tribe. Consider these people to be role models. This is a nice way to end a course like this. I'm getting nostalgic already.

- TEST AT THE END OF CHAPTER SIX. THERE WILL BE 30 MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS FROM MY TALKS AND FIVE SUCH QUESTIONS FROM THE BOOK. THE THIRD TEST IS SCHEDULED FOR APRIL 28. WE HAVE A BONUS CLASS ON APRIL 30.

WE DO NOT HAVE A FINAL EXAM. THE THIRD SECTION TEST ON APRIL 28 IS YOUR FINAL OBLIGATION.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Katherine Graham [at left] led the *Washington Post* through some of its greatest triumphs. She's here with her editor, **Ben Bradlee**, after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the newspaper in the Pentagon Papers case.

A Note

This course does not follow the chronology of American journalism. It covers the territory thematically.

We consider the last 350 years of journalism on these shores in a somewhat unorthodox way. It seems like it's a good idea to go through this history, looking for themes and ideas and not conform to a diary-like telling of the story of American journalism. If a break from chronology causes difficulty, please let me know. There are a number of good books that trace the chronology of American journalism.

The best history of journalism is Chris Daly's *Covering America* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2012)

Fine print

BU has a student honor code. Take this pledge: "On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing the assignment."

I will not tolerate cheating. If I discover that you have violated the honor code, I will do everything I can to boot you from the class and from the college.

The Boston University academic conduct code is here: www.bu.edu/academics/resources/academic-conduct-code/

Also see bu.edu/policies to learn about reporting sexual harassment and sexual misconduct. More information follows.



Nellie Bly was America's first celebrity reporter.



BETTMAN ARCHIVE

Frederick Douglass was a runaway slave when he began writing for the *Liberator*, Boston's abolitionist newspaper.

A thought

Consider this syllabus a contract. I've made promises I intend to keep. By not dropping the class, I assume you accept the conditions.

There are two guiding philosophers in my life: Elvis Presley (who said, "If this ceases to be fun, we will cease to do it.") and my late mother (who said, "If we all liked the same thing, it would be a pretty dull world.") Those two great thinkers shape my approach to this course.

I hope this course deepens your interest in journalism and helps you understand the legacies of these storytellers.

Some words about journalism

Favorite fancy-pants or funny quotes

The purpose of journalism is to irritate, infuriate and inform.

JESS LEWIS GARDNER III

Student in my first class

The past actually happened, but history is only what somebody wrote down.

A. WHITNEY BROWN

Author and former 'Saturday Night Live' performer

I would be a journalist if for no other reason than I would rather drink with journalists than any other people on Earth.

HUNTER S. THOMPSON

Doctor of Gonzo Journalism

It is not death or torture or imprisonment that threatens us as American journalists. It is the trivialization of our industry.

TED KOPPEL

Formerly of ABC News

The job of the newspaper is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

FINLEY PETER DUNNE

Early 20th century journalist

You can't rely on a horse to gather news. This is the principal difference between a horse and a man.

MARK TWAIN

Who needs no introduction

I wouldn't be here if there were no trouble. Trouble is news, and gathering news is my job.

MARGUERITE HIGGINS

Celebrated war correspondent

Journalism is what we need to make democracy work.

WALTER CRONKITE

Longtime CBS News managing editor

Reporters aren't very bright as a general rule. I mean, most of us learn to write when we're kids. Then we go on to other things.

BOBBY KNIGHT

College basketball coach



Clarissa Ward is the author of *On All Fronts*.

I would trust citizen journalism as much as I would trust citizen surgery.

MORLEY SAFER

Formerly of CBS News

Be outrageous, ridicule the fraidy-cats, rejoice in all the oddities that freedom can produce.

MOLLY IVINS

Former reporter and columnist

History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.

MAYA ANGELOU

Acclaimed poet and actor

Journalism is printing what someone else does not want printed. Everything else is public relations.

GEORGE ORWELL

Journalist and author

The quality of democracy and the quality of journalism are deeply entwined.

BILL MOYERS

Journalist and philosopher

Six things to know

1. Sexual misconduct. Boston University is committed to fostering a safe, productive learning environment. Title IX and our school policy prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, which regards sexual misconduct – including harassment, domestic and dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. We understand that sexual violence can undermine students' academic success and we encourage students who have experienced some form of sexual misconduct to talk to someone about their experience, so they can get the support they need. Confidential support and academic advocacy resources can be found with the Center for Sexual Assault Response & Prevention (SARP) at <http://www.bu.edu/safety/sexual-misconduct/>.

2. Equal opportunity. BU has strict guidelines on classroom behavior and practices when it comes to treatment of students and guests on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, mental or physical disability, genetic information, military service, national origin, or due to marital, parental, or veteran status. Discrimination for any of these reasons is prohibited. Please refer to the [Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Policy](#) for more details.

3. A positive classroom. At your discretion, please alert me to anything related to preferred pronouns, preferred name or nickname, or any extenuating circumstances or trigger warnings (personal, medical, etc.) that might impact your classroom experience. I want to make sure you have the most positive experience in the classroom as possible. If work that gets shown in this class, professional or student-generated, offends you in anyway, please mention it in class or talk to us privately about it so that we can all learn from each other. This is not to say we will ever restrict freedom of speech or water down an aggressive or edgy idea, but we want to discuss anything that someone deems troublesome or offensive.

4. Disability and access services. If you are a student with a disability or believe you might have a disability that requires accommodations, please contact the [Office of Disability and Access Services](#) (DAS) at 617-353-3658 to coordinate any reasonable accommodation requests. DAS is located at 25 Buick Street, on the third floor.

5. Student athletes. All student-athletes should be provided with a sheet from Student-Athlete Support Services regarding absences throughout the semester. These sheets should be handed in as soon as possible to avoid potential conflicts and so arrangements can be made to provide for missed lecture notes, classwork, or discussion.

6. Academic code of conduct. All BU students are bound by the [Academic Conduct Code](#). Please review to ensure you are acting responsibly and ethically in regard to your academics.

Additional resources

In addition to the resources listed above, please know that we are here to help you find the resources to help you get through stressful times.

Support services

<https://www.bu.edu/com/resources/current-students/student-support/>

COM Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

<https://www.bu.edu/com/about-com/diversity-equity-inclusion/>

Newbury Center for First-Generation Students

<http://bu.edu/newbury-center>

COM Writing Center

<https://www.bu.edu/com/for-current-students/the-com-writing-center/>

Dean of Students office

<https://www.bu.edu/dos/>

Note: Any student who is experiencing food or housing insecurity and believes this may affect their performance in the course is urged to contact the Dean of Students for support. In addition, please notify the professor if you are comfortable in doing so. This will enable us to provide any resources that we may possess.



DAVID GAHR

A lot of talent for one newsroom. In the early 1960s, the *New York Herald-Tribune* was the place to be for the explosion of literary journalism – then known as the New Journalism. Left to right: reporters **Tom Wolfe** and **Gloria Steinem**, **Clay Felker**, editor of the Sunday magazine (surviving today as *New York* magazine), reporter **Peter Maas**, columnist **Jimmy Breslin** and graphic designer **Milton Glaser**.

Instructor biography

I worked for newspapers and magazines before I started teaching. My first job, at *The Courier-Tribune* in Bloomington, Ind., lasted until that fine little newspaper went out of business. I was at *The Palm Beach Post* briefly and then joined *The American Spectator*, then served two years at *The Saturday Evening Post*. While at the *Post*, I helped edit a couple of books, including an anthology called *The American Story*.

Since I started teaching, I've taken several short term jobs – sometimes in the summers, sometimes night work on the copy desk during the school year – on *The Norman* (Okla.) *Transcript*, *The Courier-Journal* (Louisville, Ky.), *The Tampa Bay Times* and *The Gainesville* (Fla.) *Sun*. I've written reviews and features for *The Orlando Sentinel*, *The Tampa Bay Times* and *The Boston Globe* fairly regularly since 1989. (Note the beauty of Associated Press Style in this paragraph.)

I earned a bachelor's in history and a master's in journalism from Indiana University, writing a historical survey of the portrayal of journalists in popular culture. I earned my Ph.D. in higher education administration from the University of Oklahoma, though that was largely a history degree. My dissertation was a historical account of student unrest in the aftermath of the shooting of four students at Kent State University in 1970.

Some of my books:

- *Everybody Had an Ocean* (Chicago Review Press, 2017) tells the story of the intersection of music and crime in the Los Angeles rock'n'roll world of the 1960s.
- *Too Old to Die Young* (Dredger's Lane, 2015) is a collection of articles, short stories, reviews and other stuff.
- *Homegrown in Florida* (University Press of Florida, 2012) is a collection of stories about growing up in Florida.
- *Mile Marker Zero* (Crown Books, 2011) is about the writers, artists, actors and musicians who found their artistic identities in Key West.
- *Outlaw Journalist* (W.W. Norton, 2008) is a biography of Hunter S. Thompson.
- *Highway 61* (W.W. Norton, 2003) is a memoir of a 6,000-mile road trip with my eldest son.
- *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay* (W.W. Norton, 2000) is an anthology tracing the history of popular music.

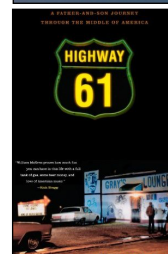
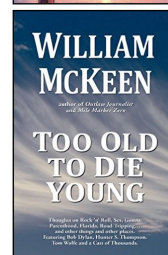
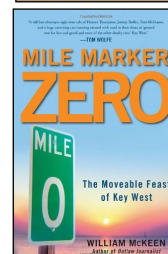
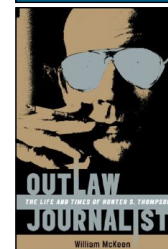
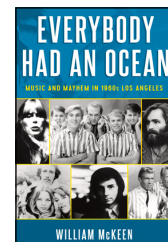
I have seven children – Sarah, a designer in New York; Graham, an environmental officer in Indianapolis; Mary, a talent agent in Chicago; Savannah, a nurse in Boston; Jackson, an artist in residence at my residence; Travis, a baseball and business major at Rivier University and Charley, a business major at Miami of Ohio. I also have six magnificent grandchildren, Mabel, Pearl, Rose, Myer, Vivienne and Westley. I have another one – a boy child – due in May.

Before becoming professor and chairman of the Boston University Department of Journalism, I taught at Western Kentucky University for five years, the University of Oklahoma for four years, and the University of Florida for 24 years, the last dozen as department chairman. I served 13 years as chairman at BU, for a grand total of 25 years in that job. I've been asked to serve as acting chair of the journalism department for 2026. I've just a fella that can't say no.

I've been at BU since 2010 and I think it's a darn swell place.

I hope you enjoy the course.

Wm. McKeen



Shameless plug: I have seven children who'd like to go back to three meals a day. Feel free to purchase several copies to support this cause.