

## Voices of the World Program

**Instructors:** Atul Singh and Abul-Hasanat Siddique

**Method of Instruction:** Lectures, Discussions and Practical Exercises

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**Duration:** 5 classes of 2 hours

**Location:** Boston, United States; Guadalajara, Mexico; Rabat, Morocco; Eldoret, Kenya; Gandhinagar, India; Vienna, Austria

**Age:** 18-30 years old

**Certificate:** On completion of the program, a certificate by Fair Observer and the United Nations Foundation will be awarded.

At its worst, journalism can be full of sound and fury signifying little or nothing. Far too often, the love life of a Hollywood actor gains more attention than drought in southern Africa. Therefore, [Fair Observer](#) and the [United Nations Foundation](#) have got together to train students and young journalists to focus on substantive issues such as water, health and poverty eradication.

The Voices of the World Program will inspire young minds from around the world to tell their own stories regarding these issues. A community of 300 students from six countries—the United States, Mexico, Morocco, Kenya, India and Austria—will participate in this program. They will learn the tools of the trade of good journalism, which will enable them to tell compelling stories to a global audience.

### Course Goals

The course goals are as follows:

1. Inspire young minds around the world to tell their own stories.
2. Train them to focus on substantive issues such as water, health and poverty eradication.
3. Teach students the tools of the trade of good journalism so that they can tell compelling stories about substantive issues to a global audience.

## Course Summary

Today, the lives and destinies of over 7 billion people on the planet are inextricably intertwined. Poverty, hunger, health, education and water remain issues that require urgent attention. Yet these issues rarely make it on the news agenda, which is largely top down and often pushes the poor and marginalized out of focus.

Therefore, it is important that people take control of their own narratives by learning the tools of the trade to tell their stories and the stories behind their stories infused with their histories, philosophies and deepest beliefs. In the words of Niclas Kjellström-Matseke, the best way forward is “free, respectful, insightful and unpredictable journalism.”

This journalism is based on **critical thinking**, rigorous **analysis** and engaging **storytelling**. A good journalist is an observer, an investigator, a raconteur and a keeper of conscience all rolled into one. This course will give students a flavor for and an understanding of good journalism.

## Course Description

The “journalistic method” is about **examination** and **explication** of truth. The “news” is meant to comprise new developments that society should be aware of. Journalists are observers and chroniclers of their time. Novelist James Michener reportedly said that “journalism is history in a hurry.” Therefore, journalists have a duty not only to the society they live in, but to future generations as well.

Students who aim to be journalists have to focus on the following:

1. **Awareness:** Only an **engaged** citizen can choose which stories to cover. The world is teeming with facts and countless developments. For instance, news media often cover dramatic stories of drought. However, the receding of glaciers, the drying up of rivers, and falling groundwater levels do not receive attention, leave aside analysis. The most important question in choosing a story is to think about its significance. An issue, event or trend increases in importance if it affects larger numbers more deeply. The same is true if an issue has long term significance such as the pollution of air, water and soil that is already affecting the health of millions and imperiling the future of humanity. In brief, students have to learn to cut through the noise and focus on issues that matter.
2. **Forming Hypotheses:** Once a journalist picks a story, he or she has to explain its significance. To do so, journalists must form hypotheses. If cattle farmers are cutting trees in the Amazon, that might be important because their action might harm the environment, hurt

indigenous peoples and earn them illegal profits thanks to collusion by corrupt officials. Each of these is a hypothesis that needs further examination. Perhaps only one of these hypotheses might stand. The important thing to remember is that hypotheses are like maps that help us get from one point to another. They drive our understanding of issues, how we conduct research and how we frame stories. Hence, if and when we find inaccuracies, we have to **refine** our hypotheses.

3. **Mapping Discourse:** Most issues are complex and there are multiple points of view. Journalists must learn to **triangulate**. They need to examine as many sources as possible and rely on those that are credible. Familiarity with the discourse on the issues under examination is essential. Journalists have to be cognizant of major schools of thought and key debates. For instance, climate change is a major issue for the world, and many believe that it is caused by uncontrolled emissions. Knowing the various data points collected by various scientists is fundamental for any journalist focusing on this issue. There are some people who deny climate change, and journalists worth their salt have to examine their arguments and reasons for doing so. It could be that journalists find that those opposing climate change are being funded by oil companies or religious organizations. It might also be the case that journalists find new evidence that could shift the discourse. The key to being a good journalist is being open and aware of different narratives before picking one.

4. **Evaluating Evidence:** Even a mighty report based on a ton of numbers might be deeply flawed. The recent financial crisis demonstrated that economists, bankers and investors could all be profoundly wrong. Therefore, it is important that journalists **evaluate evidence in all its forms**. Testing assumptions, assessing methodology and examining the logic through which scholars, thinkers and experts reach their conclusions is par for the course. Journalists have to interview properly, listen carefully and follow-up with the right questions. They must remember not to conflate correlation with causality. For instance, if it rains whenever we see a grey cat on the roof, it does not mean that the cat causes the rain.

5. **Transparency:** Journalism at its best is a work of **inquiry** and **scholarship**. Good journalists attribute quotes to people, reveal where their information comes from and explain how they reach conclusions. Transparency is important for another reason. It helps build trust. Audiences are only open to stories when they trust the narrator. The best way to establish trust is to be as transparent as possible. Of course, there are certain occasions when journalists have to keep their sources confidential because they might otherwise be at risk. Even in this situation it is important to explain the reasoning to the audience. People read the news to know things and transparency is a key virtue in the profession.

6. **Storytelling:** Journalists write stories based in fact. Facts are important, but journalists need to remember that they are not writing a legal report. Good journalists are terrific storytellers who capture their readers' attention and make them **care**. From the earliest times, when human beings gathered around a fire, storytelling emerged as the most powerful way of transmitting information to a group and to multiple generations. A good journalist ties in facts in a narrative that is immediate and powerful. This narrative crystallizes the event, trend or issue the journalist has set out to examine. An account of a young girl or boy in a war zone or a mother trying to make ends meet in a tough slum is more powerful than a dry rendition of statistics about war or poverty.

7. **Articulation:** Journalists rely on compelling titles, punchy summaries and structure to get their point across. Grammar, punctuation and spelling matter. Brevity, clarity, simplicity and accessibility are key virtues. Explanations and transitions help readers understand better. Speaking, writing and even making videos are extremely interconnected. Even a good story has to be told in a compelling manner. It has to keep the audience engaged and inspire them to think. Knowing one's audience is essential because that helps to articulate the story appropriately. In a sentence, journalists must **have something to say and say it well**.

## Course Schedule

### **Class 1: Awareness, Hypotheses and Discourse**

Duration: 2 hours

Method of Instruction: Socratic

Students are questioned on what they know about the challenges facing the planet such as water, health and poverty eradication. The back and forth between the instructor and students intends to focus on the importance of substantive issues and how to cover them. It will bring to light how people have different and often opposing perspectives. Hence, discourse is critical for any healthy society. Over this session, students learn how to be more aware as citizens, form hypotheses and learn how to start out as journalists.

### **Class 2: Evidence, Transparency, Storytelling and Articulation**

Duration: 2 hours

Method of Instruction: Explain via example

This class will be about the tools of the trade and will examine basic principles with practical examples. The starting point here is collecting evidence. If a village well is drying then it is important to show data over some years that shows falling levels. This data might be available in local records or in a university. Once we have this data, we have to be transparent and reveal

our source to the audience. Now, we can tell the story of the drying up of the well in the context of the region or even the planet. The art of crafting a story with an introduction, narrative and conclusion will then be demonstrated by examining a well told story.

### **Class 3: Discussion on Issue**

Duration: 2 hours

Method of Instruction: Socratic & presenting

The class will discuss water, health or poverty eradication in class. If the lecture hall has Internet, Fair Observer contributors can discuss issues with students via Skype or Google+. Students will choose topics to write on that will be informed by their context. The instructor will divide the groups into teams of five and streamline discussion in each group. At the end of the class, groups will summarize the contents of their discussion and this will form the basis for blog pieces or articles of 500-1,000 words, the best of which will be published by *Fair Observer*.

### **Class 4: Best Practices**

Duration: 2 hours

Method of Instruction: Lecture with examples

This will be a deep dive into examining best examples of journalism. The instructor will pick out examples of exemplary journalism in the form of articles, audio and video. Then the instructor will explain to the class what makes these works tick. Students will go through Fair Observer contributor guidelines and learn how these are applied. Students will form groups by the end of the class to work on projects together.

### **Class 5: Consolidation and Review**

Duration: 2 hours

Method of Instruction: Socratic & practical

Students will revise principles and tools. Those interested in photo features, videos and multimedia projects will choose their topics. The instructor will facilitate and focus their choices. The instructor will advise on the topics chosen for articles and blog pieces. The deadline for the submission of the work will be 14 days after the final class. Students will give suggestions to instructor for further improvement.