



## Independent Study Project in Journalism

ISPJ-3000 (4 Credits / 120 hours)

SIT Study Abroad Program:  
**South Africa: Social and Political Transformation**

**PLEASE NOTE:** This syllabus represents a recent semester. Because courses develop and change over time to take advantage of unique learning opportunities, actual course content varies from semester to semester.

### Course Description

In this four-week course, students execute a full-length feature on a social, environmental, or political issue in South Africa or the contemporary world more broadly, in the media format of their choosing and depending upon their experience in that format. The feature should meet the standards for publication or broadcast in a media outlet in South Africa and the United States. Students partner with South African journalism trainees at the Times Media Group, work alongside journalists affiliated with Peabody Award-winning Round Earth Media, and are mentored by professional South African journalists. Professional journalists provide hands-on advice and mentoring at every stage of story development, sharing expertise gathered from years in challenging reporting situations. Story topics are assessed based on originality, richness, and appeal to a broad audience in both the US and South Africa. Students learn what it means to organize a story, to select sources, to question deeply, to work toward balance, to be alert to bias and clichés, to respond to editors' feedback, check facts, rework and re-write, strive for clarity and achieve accessible, flowing prose supported by images.

As part of its commitment to mentoring aspiring journalists, Round Earth Media editors have agreed to consider pitching the most successful stories (entirely at Round Earth's discretion) to top-tier news outlets. South African journalism partners may also publish features in a media outlet affiliated with The Times Media Group and credit their American partner on the story. However the program makes no guarantee that student stories will be pitched and/or accepted by a media outlet.

### Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, students will be equipped to:

- Conduct a field-based journalistic project (ISPJ) with respect to professional and ethical norms;
- Demonstrate understanding of reporting in an international context;

- Produce a report that documents the process of producing their feature story or photography (ISPJ); and
- Submit their journalism to Round Earth Media editors to be considered for publication.

### **Course Requirements**

All components of the program, beginning with orientation and including the *Field Ethics of Journalism in South Africa* course, thematic seminars, homestays, educational excursions, intensive isiZulu language study, and associated forms of cultural interaction within the host society, are used to refine and deepen the ISPJ project. Ultimately, the successful completion of the ISPJ depends, to no small degree, on the rigor, originality, and sophistication with which the student has attended to prior coursework along with finding a compelling and original story topic.

All ISPJ topics (story pitches) must be received in advance and approved by the program's academic director prior to the start of the ISPJ course and affiliated advisors from Round Earth Media and The Times Media group.

Students are expected to master the highest standards of journalism and journalism ethics especially as practiced in South Africa. Along with their final feature, students must submit an ISPJ substantive report covering such areas as journalistic ethics, issue analysis, data collection, field reporting, accessibility of sources, interview dynamics, and the general story development process. Students will present their project at the end of the program to an audience of their peers, program staff, professional journalists, and advisors.

During the ISPJ, each SIT student works together with a South African journalism trainee at The Times Media Group. These pairs work together to produce a story on the topic of their pitch (which was developed and accepted earlier in the program). SIT students write their story in English, with a reporting credit to their South African partner. The draft of this story is due two weeks before the end of the course. This is a rare opportunity to learn more about the reporter-editor relationship and to work directly with an experienced journalist who guides the student's reporting and writing. The stories undergo repeated revisions, often as many as five different edits before final submission.

### **Readings**

While the majority of the ISPJ work should be conducted in the field, readings in preparation for, and throughout the ISPJ period, are strongly encouraged and will be based on the specific topic of study.

**ISPJ Guidelines and Requirements:** The student will spend a minimum of 120 hours on the ISPJ with a majority of this work conducted in the field (as opposed to library research, for example). This includes time spent reading, developing contacts, interviewing, writing, and meeting/talking with the academic director and journalist/advisor. Progress updates will be expected weekly.

Unless approved for an alternative ISPJ, the final product is a typed and bound 1000-1500 word feature story with additional components including the following:

1. **The Pitch.** This is the story pitch to your editor.
2. **Development & evolution of the story idea.** Explain the process by which you arrived at this story idea. How did the idea evolve into the pitch? What is this story's relevance to your

personal interests and course of study at your home institution? Why did you produce the story in the format you chose?

**3. Sources, interviews, scenes.** How did you find your sources, your elements, interviews, and scenes? What/who are they? What problems/challenges did you encounter in reporting this story and how did you solve them (or not solve them)?

**4. Journalism ethics.** What ethical issues did you encounter in reporting this story and how did you resolve those ethical issues? Were there ethical issues unique to South Africa?

**5. Potential media outlet and audience.** Where do you think your story might be placed? Why do you think this media outlet would be interested in your story? Who is your audience? Why do you think this story will be attractive to that audience? How did you produce the story to keep it interesting?

**6. The Story.**

**7. Photos.** Your story must be accompanied by at least three photos with a caption for each. In addition, you must submit three photos of you and your partner working in the field on your story.

**8. South Africa news.** What are the three best, most informative articles you read on South Africa and why do you find each of them so informative? What do you think are the three best sources of information on South Africa—anything including social media—and why?

**7. Conclusion:** What could have been done better? Is this a story that deserves a follow-up? If so, what might that be? What did you learn from doing this story?

In addition, a 20-30 minute oral presentation highlighting the story and the process of reporting will be given to colleagues, community members, program staff, the academic director, the project journalists/advisors, and other invited guests.

### **Human Subjects Review**

All ISPJ proposals must reflect a thoughtful and culturally-appropriate consideration of the effects of the inquiry on the participants in the project, with an eye to the highest standards of journalism and journalism ethics. Any questions or concerns that cannot be resolved at the program level (through the Local Review Board) are forwarded to SIT's Institutional Review Board for review.

### **Evaluation and Grading Criteria**

At the end of the ISPJ period, students are expected to present their work to the group and the journalist/advisor. This presentation must reveal the student's mastery of his/her story. Timely completion of ISPJ deadlines is expected. Late submissions will be penalized. Assessment of both written work and the oral presentation is based on accuracy, journalistic quality, and adherence to the highest journalistic and ethical standards.

### **Assessment**

ISPJ paper 80%

ISPJ presentation 20%

SIT Study Abroad awards letter grades to all students in order to give standard values to an assessment of work. Pass/Fail and Credit/No Credit are not options.

### **Grading Scale**

94-100% A

90-93% A-

87-89% B+

84-86% B

80-83% B-  
77-79% C+  
74-76% C  
70-73% C-  
67-69% D+  
64-66% D  
Below 64% F

### **ISPJ grading guidelines as follows**

**A:** Ready for publication or broadcast. Shows mastery of facts and elements. Story is compelling and original.

**A-/B+:** Accurate. Contains all relevant material but may lack maximum precision and clarity in storytelling. May have spelling or grammar errors in text or lighting and sound problems in images and footage. The difference between an A- and B+ is the degree to which these occur.

**B:** Needs some editing, some minor rewriting, and minor production editing. All the elements are included.

**B-/C+:** A significant problem or two somewhere in the analysis, focus, organization, shooting, and/or production. The difference between a B- and C+ is the degree to which these problems appear.

**C:** Missing facts and key information. Major re-editing/reshooting or post production editing necessary. Missing crucial elements.

**C-:** Very weak effort.

**D:** Overhaul required. Poor organization, reporting, shooting, and/or production. Major storytelling issues (including sourcing, imaging) and absence of critical thinking.

**F:** Failure to meet assignment requirements and standards. Missed deadline.

Final grades will reflect plus (+) or minus (-).

### **Policies and Procedures as they apply to the ISPJ:**

Deadlines: Grades will be affected by late submissions. **The draft ISPJ paper is due approximately two weeks before the final ISPJ is due, and your editor/advisor may set further deadlines for you as well.**

### **Academic Honesty Policy**

This program has zero tolerance for plagiarism. Academic honesty is expected of all students. All quotes and source material must be properly attributed and verified. Your reporting must be original, truthful, accurate, and free of fabrication. Any work you present as your own must be your own. Violations of this policy include plagiarism, fabrication, and any other form of cheating.

Definitions and Examples:

**CHEATING:** The conscious use of unauthorized, prohibited, or unacknowledged materials or methods, including, but not limited to, checking mobile devices, computers, or notes during online courses or copying others' work.

**FABRICATING:** The conscious falsification or invention of information, quotes, sources, or any other material presented as non-fiction.

**PLAGIARIZING:** The conscious representation of someone else's work as your own. Please note that ANY failure to accurately and completely document ALL uses of source material constitutes academic dishonesty. You may use a quote from another source, but it must be attributed in journalistic style. Background and contextual information may NOT be taken from Wikipedia or many other online sites. When in doubt, discuss appropriate sourcing with the AD BEFORE submitting your assignment.

THIS IS JOURNALISM: DO NOT MAKE UP ANYTHING in work submitted in our program.

**Disability Services:** Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact Disability Services at [disabilityservices@sit.edu](mailto:disabilityservices@sit.edu) for information and support in facilitating an accessible educational experience. Additional information regarding SIT Disability Services, including a link to the online request form, can be found on the Disability Services website at <http://studyabroad.sit.edu/disabilityservices>.

**Please refer to the SIT Study Abroad handbook** for policies on academic integrity, ethics, warning and probation, diversity and disability, sexual harassment, and the academic appeals process. Also, refer to the specific information available in the Student Handbook and the program materials given to you at Orientation.