

# Syllabus

Investigative Skills

Instructor: Sarah Cohen / [sarah.cohen@nytimes.com](mailto:sarah.cohen@nytimes.com) / 212.556.8027 (w)

Wednesdays 6-9pm, Sep. 17-Oct. 15 2014

**Course description:** This class will introduce students the "documents state of mind" that is a hallmark of great investigative reporting. This outlook is used to shed light on secretive governments, detail the inner workings of a company, and find the right individuals to lead you to stories.

## Learning objectives:

- Understand the kinds of public records held by government and how to gain access to them.
- Know how to background an individual or organization on deadline and for longer-term projects.
- Have experience using standard source such as campaign finance, lobbying, corporate filings, 990s, property records and more.
- Gain a strategy for finding records when you don't know where to look.

**Readings:** There are no required textbooks – you will be given readings as needed. If you aren't already a member, you will need to [join](#) Investigative Reporters and Editors to get access to story archives, tipsheets and other online documents. (\$25 for student membership. Leave the "subscription" option blank.)

## Key deadlines:

- Each week (after the first), you should submit a short reaction to one of the stories that was assigned for reading. We'll discuss more about what should be in those short memos in class, but they are generally reflections on the methods or success of the stories. These are due Monday by 5pm.
- By Monday, Oct. 5, you must submit a public records request for a record you have found on your own. This can be a city, state, or federal FOI / FOIL. If you are working from a different country, you can submit a public records request using the law of your country if you prefer. More detail will be given on this assignment. You should not file your request with the government before getting feedback, and don't have to file it formally at all if you don't want the records.
- Final project, due Wednesday, Oct. 15, before class.

**Standards and Objectives :** Succeeding in journalism often involves showing up and getting your work done on time. To pass this course, then, you will need to show up and meet all of deadlines. I will give you prompt feedback, usually within a few days. Your work is expected to meet the usual professional standards: writing that is direct, to the point, and free of factual errors or omissions. Be sure to verify name spellings, ages and other personal details. I will alert you if there are issues with your writing that need to be addressed.

**Course Policies\*\* :** \*\*There are no excused absences or extensions of deadlines except for a true emergency, incapacitating illness or religious observance. You make choices about what to do with your time every day. Conflicts arising from other school work or personal commitments such as weddings or family visits are expressions of your priorities. They may be understandable decisions, and I might make the same choices in your position, but they're not emergencies.

Of course, all work is expected to be your own and should be guided by professional journalistic standards as well as the honor code of Columbia University.

Eating dinner and using phones, computers and other devices during class is distracting to everyone else and your instructor. Step outside if you need to partake in any of these activities. We'll take at least one break in each class.

All conversations in class are not for publication or attribution. Do not live tweet or blog the class on a public site.

**Final project :** Your final project will be to background a person or organization using records alone. You will choose an elected state, local or national public official or a for-profit or non-profit organization. You may have to go to a local courthouse to complete this assignment, so start early.

You should use any court records, property records, financial disclosure statements, campaign finance reports, financial documents and other public records we discuss in class to background the person or organization.

More detail on the form of this assignment will be provided after the first class.

**My bio :** \*\*Sarah Cohen is a reporter and editor at The New York Times specializing in database and documents reporting, mainly on investigative and enterprise projects. From 2009 to 2012, she served as the Knight Professor of the Practice at Duke University, where she founded the

Reporters' Lab, an incubator for new tools for improving the efficiency of original reporting. As a database editor at The Washington Post for a decade before joining Duke, she shared in the Pulitzer Prize in Investigative Reporting and other national awards for her work on local and national stories. Cohen currently serves as president of Investigative Reporters.

**Contact:** I'm available for consultation before or after class by appointment. Most weeks we'll have in-class exercises, and I will catch up with you individually then. You can also email me at [sc3595@columbia.edu](mailto:sc3595@columbia.edu) or call me at work at 212.556.8027.