

The Front of Book Fall, 2017

Professor: Nick Marino (marinonick@gmail.com)

Class: Mondays from 6:20 to 10 pm, 20 Cooper Square (Room 653)

Office hours: By appointment at 1 World Trade Center, 28th floor

About the class

The front of book is the section where young journalists are most likely to launch their careers, whether as writers or editors. And so we'll study the topic from both perspectives, with a goal of giving you a 360-degree perspective on the juggling act of creating a front-of-book section. You'll pitch ideas, and you'll evaluate pitches. You'll report and write stories, and you'll deliver feedback on each other's work. You'll complete the semester comfortable with building and refining a story lineup (the editor's task), and with pitching and executing an assignment (the writer's responsibility). This process will culminate in a final project that entails developing an entire front-of-book section for a magazine of your choosing.

Reading

The best way to learn magazine writing is to read a ton of it. So we'll study individual front-of-book pieces selected from various titles, and we'll also do case studies of five very different front-of-book sections—Bon Appetit, New York, Afar, Vanity Fair and Cosmopolitan—to see how the various storytelling rubrics apply across disparate subject matter. Students will be required to buy the most recent issue of each title, and bring it to class.

Furthermore, we'll crack books with something to say about this kind of magazine work. These will include Roy Peter Clark's *Help! For Writers* (2013), a book that grapples both with idea generation (which really is the coin of the realm in front-of-book sections) and with sharpening angles and revising drafts.

Final project

The class will culminate with you pitching and creating an entire front-of-book section for one of the five magazines we critique (or another we discuss in depth). You'll be welcome to use revised versions of previously written pieces for class, though you'll also be expected to produce new material—both adhering to rubrics already in the magazine and innovating fresh ones of your own. Although it's not due until December 16, I implore you to start this project early. It's worth a lot of points, and a late start could send your grade tumbling into the lower reaches of the alphabet.

Deadlines

Assignments will be due at 5 pm Friday unless otherwise specified. You'll lose half the value of any assignment turned in later than that. Be a pro and turn your stuff in on time.

Grading

Your assignments will have varying point levels. Your work will add up to a possible 500 points. The point-to-grade breakdown is as follows:

A = 500 to 450

B = 449 to 400

C = 399 to 350

D = 349 to 300

F = 299 or less

Office Hours

Good journalism is about communication, whether between reporter and source or between writer and editor. The whole enterprise revolves around a clear expression of ideas. To that end, I'm asking every student to meet with me at least once to discuss their work. The meeting will be worth 15 points and held at the GQ office. Please plan yours more than 24 hours in advance. While meeting about your final project may make the most sense, you're of course invited to meet sooner than that and more often than just one time. Only the first meeting will be worth any points.

Schedule

Week 1 (Sept 10 - a Sunday): Intro

We'll begin by examining the dramatic ways front-of-book sections have evolved over the last 10 years—and, in turn, we'll explore how that evolution has changed the roles of FOB writers and editors. For decades, after all, FOB stories were essentially shorter versions of what appeared elsewhere in a particular mag. Nowadays they're fundamentally different: The ratio of art to edit has flipped, and the number of different storytelling rubrics has exploded. While FOB space constraints demand clear thinking and tight writing to convey every idea quickly, the section's myriad storytelling rubrics allow wild creativity in *how* we present that information. More than ever, the FOB is about finding fresh ways to establish a magazine's tone, to set its rhythm, to unveil its content, to convey its mission. It's about packaging pages and anticipating trends—often with a three-month lead-time. Sometimes it's about thinking visually. Other times it's about spinning a narrative with the depth of a novel and the economy of a haiku. Almost always, it's about finding clever, counterintuitive topics that can have an extra life online.

In class: September issue of GQ

Reading for next week: Spin on Lil people, Details on fish shacks, SI's extra mustard, GQ and MJ on Kickalicious, NYM on the boxer sculpture, NYM on Wendy Davis, NYM on McDonald's, Esquire on old restaurants, GQ on March Madness, New Yorker on scandals, Paste on Karen O, NYM's the Approval Matrix, Paste on David Cross

Assignment: Vanity Fair critique. (15 points)

Week 2 (Sept 18): Shaping ideas into rubrics

Now that you can identify compelling story ideas, we'll discuss what to do with those ideas. A lot of magazines solve this problem by running recurring pages that turn into franchises, and we'll muse on the various pros and cons of that. We'll also explore some of the exciting non-linear rubrics that have come to define the modern front-of-book: charts, quizzes, decision trees and other atomized, unpredictable ways of conveying information.

Assignment: Afar critique. (15 points)

Reading: Roy Peter Clark book

Week 7 (Sept 25): Writing & Editing

In this fundamentals boot-camp. I'll teach you all the tricks I've learned over the years: words to avoid, strategies for beating writer's block, revision techniques, and so forth. We'll also talk about how to get the most from the writer-editor relationship—and, in the second half of the class, we'll work through editing strategies as well.

Guest speaker: Sarah Bracy Penn

In class: Pitch workshop, troubleshooting your writing

In class: Coke is it! Or is it?

Assignment: Write a FOB piece for VF or Afar in two different storyforms (30 points)

Reading: GQ on packing, MH on infused liquor, Self on an up-do, Allure on wearing flats, Self on grooming with food, MH on grooming with food, Nabokov on boiling an egg

Week 3 (Oct 23): Pitching the front of book

We all know that magazine writers are only as good as their next query letter. And the front-of-book is generally considered to be the place where freelancers break into in a particular title. So we'll drill on the art of the pitch, to ensure that you understand both how to write a successful one and how to evaluate a front-of-book

pitch from an editor's standpoint. Who should you pitch? How should you pitch them? What are they looking for? And when you're on the receiving end of a pitch letter, how can you tell whether the idea has merit—and whether the writer has the chops to pull it off? For your assignment, you'll work with a classmate to pitch and catch ideas, and will be graded on the quality of your original pitch and the quality of your feedback to your colleague. We'll also introduce the oral pitch workshop that will start almost every subsequent class (30 points).

In class: Study real freelance pitches, oral pitch workshop

Assignment: Pitch a front-of-book story to Vanity Fair, Afar or GQ (40 points; 20 writing and 20 editing)

Week 5 (Oct 9. Fall Break): No class

Assignment : Bon Appetit critique (15 points)

Week 6 (Oct 16): Service journalism

How-to pieces are another front-of-book mainstay, the kinds of pieces that help readers do everything under the sun: organize their closets, change their own oil, talk to a stranger, ask for a raise. The challenge is making all these reader-directed imperatives feel entertaining as well as useful—it's a thin line between helpful advice and know-it-all preaching. We'll walk that line and wind up on the right side.

In class: Pitch workshop

Assignment: New York magazine critique (15 points)

Guest speaker: Meryl Rothstein

Reading: Kristie Bailey pages, Wired on corporate HQ, Details on TV, Self on Yellow, NYM on \$/wd, GQ on wine and liquor, Adventure on Yucatan, ESPN on kickboxer

Week 7 (Oct 23): Thinking like an art director

The relationship between the art and editorial departments is a timeless dance, and each party must be careful not to step on the other's toes. Still, the collaboration is growing stronger all the time as FOB pages become more and more visually driven. So this class will teach us how to conceive a page based around an image, and how to handle the brief (but vital) text that orients the reader to what's happening in the picture.

In class: Pitch workshop

In class: Pajama jammy jam

Guest speaker: Kristie Bailey

Assignment: Cosmo critique (15 points)

Reading: Current issue of Entrepreneur, GQ on weddings, GQ on white wine, NYM on New Orleans travel, Esquire on summer, NYM on bars, T&L July 2013, Bon Ap May 2014,

Week 9 (Oct 30): Pacing and packaging

Today we'll learn how to make stories flow from one to the next, and thus how to calibrate the reader's experience until it feels well balanced. This will be a valuable skill as you're booking your final-project lineups: Do you have a few good reads in the section, plus a visual resting place, something bitsy, something familiar, something surprising? Are the rubrics varied? Do we have enough (or too many) sidebars? Though these are primarily an editor's responsibility, writers would do well to be comfortable with these questions as well. That way we can fire back the right kind of answer when an editor says, "I need a TK story for April—what do you have?"

In class: Pitch workshop

Guest speaker: Jason Feifer

Assignment: Write a two- or three-page package (50 points; 25 for writing and 25 for editing).

Week 10 (Nov 6): Creating a lineup

Part of the joy of studying journalism in New York is being right in the heart of the industry. So in this class we'll bring two more members of that industry to you. You'll read their mags in advance, and then hear how each of them pulls together their section. They'll then lead you through the process of building a FOB lineup that's well-balanced, well-paced, and rich in various storytelling rubrics.

In class: Create a new lineup

Assignment: Create a FOB lineup for your final project (60 points)

Reading: A.A. Gill (Vanity Fair) on Vegas, Anthony Lane (New Yorker) on Lord of the Rings, Slate on Malternatives, Hamburger on the Cape

Week 4 (Nov 13): Tuning your voice

The modern journalist's job entails balancing her own writer's voice with the voice

of her outlet. In turn, much of my job as a front-of-book editor entails harmonizing stories on disparate topics until they hang together as a cohesive unit. Everything has to share a sensibility—and savvy editors and versatile writers should be able to articulate those various sensibilities, and adapt depending on the job at hand. So today we'll dissect the ineffable notions of tone and voice. To illustrate the point, we'll take a single front-of-book story and, without altering the key facts of the piece, tweak the voice to repackage it for three titles with very strong (and very different) editorial voices.

In class: Pitch workshop

Reading: GQ Punch List, Esquire on Valentine's Day, the UK Guardian on overrated musicians, Paul Ford on SXSW, Christgau reviews

Week 10 (Nov 20): Tightening up

Every journalist who's read *Elements of Style* knows, as the good book says, to "omit needless words." This is especially handy when the art department tells you to cut a story in half, or to write a specific amount of words to fit a text box they've created alongside an image. So in today's class, we'll learn how to drill down to the core of an idea that fits snugly into a front of book. It's surprising just how much information we can pack into a small space. Indeed, we might just find that the shorter pieces are stronger.

In class: Pitch workshop

In class: Cutting text, writing to length, filling out

Assignment: Bring in your most updated resume

Reading: The Awl on freelancing, Salon on print journalism

Week 11 (Nov 27): Navigating the job market

We keep hearing that the job market for journalists is terrible. And yet we also keep hearing that there are more journalistic opportunities—more platforms, and more ways of telling stories on those platforms—than ever before. So which is it? Can both schools of thought be true? And if you want to work in an old-school magazine's front-of-book, which after all is what this class is about, how do you go about doing that?

In class: Pitch workshop

Reading: Current issue of GQ and today's New York Post

Assignment: Edit test (50 pts)

Guest speakers: Jessie Mooney, Jessica Militare, and Nikita Richardson

Week 12 (Dec 4): Nailing display copy

When I started in magazines, I was completely unprepared for the importance of writing smart headlines and deks. After all, isn't that the copy desk's job, like it is in newspapers? No indeed. Writers and editors dream those up for magazines, and they (both the editors and the headlines) are relentlessly scrutinized as stories wind their way through production—after all, as anyone versed in Search-Engine Optimization knows, killer display copy reels in readers whether the medium is digital or print. And so today we'll discuss what makes a successful hed and dek, and practice distilling even our most sophisticated story concepts into a few precious words that ignite readers' curiosity.

In class: Pitch workshop

Assignment: Write display copy for your FOB lineup (50 points)

Reading: Shouts & Murmurs on dinner specials...Dan Neil (LA Times) on Chrysler and Ducatti...Anthony Lane (New Yorker) on Star Wars...Max Silvestri (Grantland) on Guy Fieri + Ray Ray....Clay Skipper on hot yoga...Jeff Vrabel on TK

Week 13 (Dec 11): Being funny

Front-of-book sections are almost always the funniest parts of a magazine. And yet humor isn't necessarily something we spend a lot of time practicing. I say we should. Humor has been a prized virtue at every magazine I've ever edited, to the point where one magazine's hiring process entailed writing a memo on how I would make the publication funnier. Humor, like every other facet of journalism, is less alchemy than it is a craft. So in this class we'll unpack hilarious writing until we see what's inside, until we understand how it works.

In class: Pitch workshop

Guest speaker: Jeff Vrabel

Assignment: Finish rough draft of final project and bring it to Wednesday's class.

Week 14 (Dec 12): Workshopping final projects.

In our final class, you'll troubleshoot, polish, and otherwise refine your final projects. You'll peer-edit what's already on the page, and you'll have ample opportunity to ask me questions to help guide the revision process. The goal, of course, is to integrate everything we've learned through the semester. So if there's anything still unclear, now's the time to clarify.

Assignment: Complete final projects (100 points)

Final projects due: 5pm on December 15