IDEAS THROUGH PEOPLE
The art of weaving what you hear, see, and read

“Hide the ideas, but so that people find them. The most important will be the most hidden”
— Robert Bresson, Notes on the Cinematographer

“To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world”
— Salman Rushdie, Midnight’s Children

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The idea

The best journalism combines three things not easily blended: the voices of earthy human characters; the observations of a writer who sees what others do not; and larger ideas that place a moment or story in context. In this course, we will explore, through reading and practice, the complex art of giving voice to one’s subjects while finding your own voice, and of situating your writing in an intellectual tradition of yet more voices.

When journalists who write about living people return to their desks after reporting, they often find themselves with three piles of information to process: their tapes, their notes, and the books (and various other readings, from news reports to journal articles) that they hope will illuminate the story at hand. This course is organized around these three piles. It will explore various works of journalism, some voice-forward (leaning heavily on those tapes), others observation-forward (relying largely on notebooks), and still others idea-forward (propelled by what the writer has read), and some that are delicately balanced among the three piles.

While reading the masters every week (Katherine Boo, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Svetlana Alexievich, Tom Wolfe, V.S. Naipaul), students will analyze and discuss how these writers weave together the voices of others, their own observations, and larger ideas. They will study how some writers hide ideas while others lead with them. They will probe the difference between extracting ideas from close reporting on people and finding people who illustrate ideas formed from reading.
Over the semester, students will develop their skills with their own tapes, notes, and books. They will choose a subject or group of subjects to report on in a sustained way throughout the term. Exploring the tapes pile, they will produce an oral history of those subjects. Exploring the notes pile, they will write a report in their own voice chronicling their immersion in the subject’s world. Exploring the books pile, they will write a memorandum on the larger ideas implicated by their reporting. Finally, they will weave it all together into a piece combining voice, observation, and ideas in their own particular way.

**The rhythm of class**

Every class will feature some combination of the following:

- Cold calls on one or a handful of students to recite the basic facts of the reading(s) and refresh memories (N.B.: this is also an enforcement mechanism to ensure that students do the readings)
- Analysis and discussion of the readings
- Workshopping of students’ reporting projects and drafts

**Assignments**

Students’ output will be in five stages.

1. By Week 3, students must find and secure the permission of a subject or small group of subjects to report on throughout the semester. These subjects must consent fully to the journalistic project you are undertaking. Because subjects sometimes fall through, it may behoove students to have one or more backup subjects and to report on all for a time. The idea is to choose a subject whose daily life illustrates something larger that you wish to explore. If you are interested in income volatility in America, you might focus on a person whose hours change week to week. If you are interested in hatred in the age of Trump, you might seek access to a hate-crime victim — or a local prosecutor who tries such crimes.

2. In Week 5, the first of four substantial assignments is due. Based on their initial interviews with their subject(s), students will submit a narrative oral history — essentially, a transcript that is faithful to the precise words of the subject, but in which things have been moved around for literary effect. Here we will use Svetlana Alexievich (Week 2’s reading) as a model. The assignment should consist entirely of the subject’s own words, but edited so as to stand alone as a narrative piece. 1500 to 2000 words.

3. In Week 8, the second assignment is due: the chronicle of observations. Even as the student has been listening to and recording their subject, they have spent time immersed in their world — whether going to work with them, spending time in their
home, watching them do whatever is the activity of their interest. This assignment is to work from your notebook to write up, in your own voice, your observations about your subject. Physical description, the recounting of scenes, their dialogue with others. Here you are not using any of your interviews with them, keeping the piles separate for now. In the tradition of Tom Wolfe and Katherine Boo, you will write about them by leaning chiefly on what you see. 1500 words.

4. In Week 10, you will submit a short memorandum, of no more than 1000 words, exploring how your reporting relates to the world of ideas. What are the larger issues that grow out of your reporting? How does what you are finding at the level of the micro fit into the intellectual tradition? What books and other readings shed light on your reporting? Following Robert’s Bresson advice above, what ideas do you wish to hide in your piece, and how will you hide them?

5. In Week 13, you will submit a final, peer-edited work of reportage that combines elements of the prior three assignments. (You will have shared your paper with another student for comments a week earlier, and incorporated their feedback.) This piece should be readily publishable, beautifully crafted, and carefully structured. It should draw on the oral history you produced, the chronicle of observations, and on your forays into books and other readings that clarify and elucidate and put things in context. Having explored each of those elements in isolation, your task now is to braid everything together, making your own choices about what to show and what to hide, what goes in the foreground versus the background. Submissions should be somewhere between 1200 and 3000 words and must be firing on all three of our cylinders.

All papers should be submitted two days before class as Google Docs shared with the professor, and should also be printed out and brought to class.

Grading, etc.

Thirty percent of your grade will be for class participation. This means: showing up, doing the reading and knowing it, contributing energetically and thoughtfully to our discussions, being a helpful workshop mate and editor to your peers.

Another 30 percent will be for assignments 1, 2, and 3 — the rudiments of your final project. 10 percent for each one.

The remaining 40 percent will be for the final piece, weaving it all together.

All assignments are due two days before class, at midnight. Late assignments will not be accepted for any reason. All readings must be done in advance of the week under which they are listed. They will be discussed that week.

Every week, you will be asked to submit an update on, or glimpse of, your reporting. That should be submitted before midnight the night before class, via the class Slack group.
The only assignment with a rewrite requirement is the final one. The rewrite is due on our last meeting together.

If you plagiarize in any way, shape, or form, your grade will be adjusted accordingly. To zero.

**Week by week**

**Week 1: Ideas through people, two ways**

*Readings:*


*Assignment:*

Submit, via Slack, the night before class, your preliminary thoughts on what areas and ideas you wish to explore, and what types of subjects might be most promising.

**PART ONE: TAPES**

**Week 2: Oral history**

*Readings:*


*Assignment:*

A Slack post the night before class, updating your classmates on your efforts to sign up your subject(s).
Week 3: The transcript, written up

Readings:


Assignment:

A Slack post the night before class, updating your classmates on the subject you will have locked in, and your reporting strategy going forward.

Week 4: Life stories as synecdoche

Readings:

— “Digging JFK grave was his honor,” by Jimmy Breslin: http://www.newsday.com/opinion/digging-jfk-grave-was-his-honor-jimmy-breslin-1.6481560


— “The Uprooted,” by Jill Lepore, on Wilkerson’s achievement: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/09/06/the-uprooted


Assignment:

Share with your peers, via Slack, a one-paragraph sample of the transcript you are working on for assignment 1, due the following week.

PART TWO: NOTES
Week 5: Physical observation

Readings:


Assignment:

First substantial assignment due: an edited transcript on the model of the Alexievich reading.

Week 6: Trial notes

Readings:


Assignment:

Brief Slack update on the progress of your reporting.

Week 7: Notes to, and of, self

Readings:


Assignment:

Share via Slack a 100-200-word sample of your chronicle of observations, due the following week.
PART THREE: BOOKS

Week 8: Ideas (through people)

Readings:
   — “The Network Man,” by Nicholas Lemann:
     https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/10/12/the-network-man
     “Among the Disrupted,” by Leon Wieseltier:
     https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/18/books/review/among-the-disrupted.html?mcubz=0&r=0

Assignment:
   Second major assignment due: the chronicle of observations.

Week 9: Ideas without dryness

Readings:
   — “The Philosopher of Feelings,” by Rachel Aviv:
     — “The Earthquake That Will Devastate the Pacific Northwest,” by Kathryn Schulz:
     https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/07/20/the-really-big-one
     — “Silent Spring,” by Rachel Carson:
     https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1962/06/16/silent-spring-part-1

Assignment:
   Brief Slack update on the progress of your reporting.

Week 10: Going deep on the everyday

Readings:
   — “Consider the Lobster,” by David Foster Wallace:
— “Choosing a School for My Daughter in a Segregated City,” by Nikole Hannah-Jones:

— “The Shut-In Economy,” by Lauren Smiley:
https://medium.com/matter/the-shut-in-economy-ec3ec1294816

Assignment:

Third assignment due: a memorandum on the ideas at stake in, and illuminating of, and advanced by, your reporting.

Week 11: Framing up

Readings:

— “Detroit Arcadia,” by Rebecca Solnit:

— Prologue to The Age of Anger, by Pankaj Mishra:
https://us.macmillan.com/excerpt?isbn=9780374274788

Assignment:

Brief Slack update on the progress of your reporting.

PART FOUR: INTEGRATION

(In which we will read pieces that are working on all three levels, examining them as a whole while also emphasizing particular elements. In this, we will draw not only on the week’s reading but also on readings past.)

Week 12: Openings

Reading:

— “Hiroshima,” by John Hersey:
https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1946/08/31/hiroshima

Assignment:

Submit draft of final assignment to a peer for feedback. Give feedback within three days.
Week 13: The concealment of ideas

Reading:
— “Landing from the Sky,” by Adrian Nicole Leblanc:

Assignment:
Submit final assignment

Week 14: Find your character

Reading:
— “Orchid Fever,” by Susan Orlean:

Assignment:
Submit rewrite of final assignment