Literature in a Hurry: WRRI for Literary Reportage

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Some writers assume that reporting is at odds with the literary life; what could be less inspiring to the creative soul than long hours at a community board meeting taking notes? This class aims to convince you of the value of reporting to your literary nonfiction endeavors – and in the process, make you pretty damn good at it.

Through our assignments, we will address the major things you need to know to research effectively and efficiently, to report with intelligence and flair, to verify the information you amass, and to write with style, clarity, and voice on relatively short deadlines and at relatively short length. These are skills you will be glad to have, even as aspiring long-form, long-deadline narrative specialists. In this class, because we are emphasizing reporting and deadline work, we’re going to mostly stay under 1200 words (except for the final assignment, where you can go to 2000-2500).

All of you applied to the Literary Reportage concentration with projects of one kind or another. Some of you will want to report in and around your big idea; others may want to use this opportunity to venture more widely into completely different subject areas. Both approaches are fine with me. My hope is that you will find that the work we will do -- with structuring, deep research, information-mining, description, interviewing, ethics, and concise explanation of complex ideas –will help you with your big projects no matter what.

This course is designed to help you on your way to reporting and writing for publication with quick turnaround, emphasis on those last two words. The ability to meet deadlines and juggle short-term and longer-term assignments is essential in every part of the profession and therefore an important aspect of our course work.
We will be researching, writing, editing and doing plenty of rewriting. If you are not already a believer in the power of rewrite, I hope to make you one. We will aim to get very smart about doing superb preliminary research -- way beyond Google -- the kind I hope you will learn to value highly if you don’t already.

We also will reserve some time for talking journalism history, culture and ethics, both for conundrums you might one day encounter and for those you are already facing as you report and write.

Familiarize yourself with NYU/ NYMag.com’s Bedford + Bowery, which, if you come up with relevant fresh material and a worthy voice, can be a great early publishing venue for you. The site focuses on the East Village, Williamsburg, Greenpoint and Bushwick neighborhoods. Twitter: @bedbow and it has a Facebook page that would welcome your “like.” In fact, I have crafted some of these assignments with that venue specifically in mind. While some of your writing assignments will end up being learning experiences rather than masterpieces, those determined to publish something from this class this semester should be able to do so.

Deadlines are always, unless otherwise noted, Monday at 5 pm. You will post the assignment to NYU Classes, so that I, and your fellow students, have time to read it before class Tuesday morning. My best advice is this: You can do reading assignments at the last minute, but never wait until the last minute to do your reporting and writing and don’t get behind. For reporting, keep in mind that no human source owes you his or her time.

We will engage with “spot” or deadline reporting several times during this term. In these assignments, I will be looking for steady improvement in your ability to handle them on deadline. This is to give you a taste of this kind of work should you ever find yourself in the position of having to do it. These assignments may involve anything from breaking news to thoughtful reflection on a major news event to description of a scene.
In the **Spot assignments**, we will spend significant time in class writing them because having to write within a specific time frame, rather than when the mood strikes you, is an important skill. Pick one to revise to its full potential; the rest you may revise on your own time, or move on from.

I’ll expect you to be chipping away at the research, reporting and writing for your more formal **longer-deadline assignments** outside of class time, all term – until the day it is due. And we’ll be checking in with each other about this project often.

**Two longer articles**

**“Ask the Experts” 1000-words**

Part of what reporters need to do constantly is learn a lot, very quickly, about subjects in which we know nothing. We need to understand, and then translate to the public, languages of expertise that can sometimes seem as foreign to us as they do to our readers. In this assignment, you will identify a key question arising from the current news cycle that demands specialized knowledge, whether of scientists, social scientists, economists, doctors, anyone with a body of knowledge that most of the public lacks. You will then find some experts who can explain it to you. You will interview them, and overcome fears of seeming stupid in trying to clarify and make sense of what they tell you. And you will translate their expertise into lively prose that will illuminate your ignorant professor and classmates.

**“Lunch/Drinks/Coffee with WRRI” 2000- 2500 words.**

This assignment is inspired by one of my favorite newspaper features, “Lunch with the FT,” in which, every week, a Financial
Times writer sits down for a meal with an important and intellectually interesting newsmaker. In your version, you’ll interview a person over drinks, lunch, coffee or tea (alas, we don’t have the budget for the 400 Euro bottle of wine that the FT has). In your story, narrate that conversation in a way that both makes us feel we were there, and greatly illuminates the subject of your profile. This assignment emphasizes preliminary research – essential to a truly conversational depth interview. You will have to be exhaustively familiar with your subject’s work. You’re also learning here how to hang out with a subject and put them at ease, as well as how to observe and convey telling details of a conversation that we wouldn’t glean from a transcript, like body language and tone of voice. You are learning how to make a terrific story out of just one interview. This assignment was not crafted with B&B in mind but if you choose a neighborhood person who hasn’t been written about, you might be able to publish it there.

Grading:

Participation and Attendance: 40%

Spot Reporting (4 stories, reporting outside of class, writing in class, one revision): 30%

Long form features: 30%

Effort, revision, focus and improvement: 100%

I leave it to you to make sense of the above math! But seriously, it is all important. I don’t give grades on assignments during the semester because I ask you to do so much revision on the long piece, and so much risk-taking on the short ones, and grading can distract from those processes. I promise that you’ll be getting so much feedback from me throughout the semester that you won’t be surprised by your final grade, and you can always check in with me if you’re uncertain about how you’re doing.
**Reading**

Minimal, since you have a lot of reading for your other classes and so much reporting and writing for this one. But note that most days you have something on the syllabus, and that we will discuss it. Print the reading and print it to class, or have it easily accessible on your tablet.

**September 5**
**Welcome to WRRI**
Discussion of all assignments and expectations
Introduce ourselves. Tell us as much as you can about your past journalistic experience, and your proposed Literary Reportage project. We will do an in-class reporting exercise that will help us get to know each other and to start reporting and writing.

**September 12**
**Reading:**
For most of my *Nation* magazine advice columns, I interview experts. Take a look: https://www.thenation.com/admin-taxonomy/asking-for-a-friend/

**Assignment due:** story ideas or at least topics (we’ll talk about the difference!) for the two long form assignments. You don’t need to post anything, notes for class discussion are fine.

**Discussion:** “Ask the Experts” assignment

**September 19**
**Reading:** “What Do Women Want?” By Daniel Bergner, New York Times magazine, January 22, 2009
**Assignment due:** Complete initial round of reporting on “Ask the Experts.” (You may discover that you have more reporting to do as you write your draft.)

**Discussion:** How is your “Ask the Experts” story shaping up? How do you structure a short feature of this kind?

**Discussion:** Spot Reporting Event Assignment

September 26
**Assignment due:** “Ask the Experts” draft
**Workshop:** “Ask the Experts”

October 3
**Reading:**

**Spot reporting assignment:** Attend an event that interests you in the city. Make as many notes as you can on the atmosphere, the scene, the people you speak with. Note that you have had a slightly longer time frame for this than for other “spot” reporting assignments; the reason is that you may need some time to find a suitable event.

**In-Class Writing and Workshop:** Event piece.

**Discuss:** Spot reporting subculture assignment.

October 10

**Spot reporting:** New York City has many subcultures. Find a locale or event that will quickly immerse you in one of them. Hang out there, and talk to people. Write up the scene in a way that opens a window onto this community. Note that for best results you should
define your subculture narrowly (e.g. not “hipsters”) and pick one that hasn’t been written about by others. This one has B&B potential.

**In-Class Writing and Workshop:** Subculture Spot Reporting
**Discuss:** “Lunch with” assignment

October 17
**Revision due:** Ask the Experts
We will make an in-class outing to do some reporting and scene-setting work on St. Mark’s Place, followed by a quick in-class writing.

October 24
**Reading:** Lunch with FT (browse, as every single one is strong, but be sure to look at Charles Murray (by Edward Luce)

**Discussion:** Business obit, spot reporting assignment.
**Assignment due:** Complete reporting for “Lunch with WRRI”
**Workshop:** Report back! How do you see your conversation unfolding into a story?

October 31
**Reading:** Two pieces by Michelle Chen on Pearl River Mart:

**Spot reporting:** Obit for a dead or dying business. One of the most troublesome aspects of life in a ruthless and dynamic place like New York City is that the neighborhood businesses upon which we depend – laundromats, restaurants, bodegas, bars -- are always closing. Find one or your neighbors you care about, and find out why it died. (Note: this has serious B&B publishing potential! If your
business is not in any of the B&B neighborhoods, there may well be local papers or microlocal websites)

**In-Class Writing and Workshop:** Spot reporting business obit, write in class.

November 7

**Assignment due:** “Lunch with WRRI” piece

**Workshop:** Lunch with WRRI”

November 14

**Rescheduled St mark’s place**

November 21

**Reading:** Ethics Case Studies:
http://www.spj.org/ethicscasestudies.asp

And here is a less-generic one, complicated but raising the issues that I think are most important in journalism ethics (be sure to read both the post and the linked article):
https://maggiemcneill.wordpress.com/2016/04/05/melissa-gira-grant-puts-heroic-escort-heather-through-the-buzzsaw-on-buzzfeed/

We will focus on the ones that are most relevant to LR students. To prepare for class, think about which of these dilemmas you have faced. What did you do? What kinds of ethics issues have you been facing this semester that are nothing like those outlined here?

**Reading:** Russell Brand (by Lucy Kellaway)
http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/64206eb2-583f-11e4-a31b-00144feab7de.html

**Due:** Revise “Lunch with”
[Neil DeMause – guest]

November 28
http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/20/magazine/20Carr-t.html

Workshop: “Lunch with” revisions

December 5
Due: Revise one of your spot assignments
Workshop: spot revisions