New York University
Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute
Syllabus JOUR-UA 301 002
ADV REPORTING: LONG FORM NARRATIVE
Fall 2018
Professor: Penenberg, Adam L
M 11:00 a.m.-2:40 p.m.

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Office hours: Monday: 9 a.m.-11 a.m., Wednesday: noon-2 p.m., and by appointment.

Prerequisites: Investigating Journalism, Inquiry, and The Beat

Course Description

This is a capstone course that involves query writing, topic research and reading, interviewing, and repeated drafts and rewrites, leading to a full-length narrative non-fiction article aiming at a publishable level.

Long-form narrative writing doesn’t simply mean that an article has a lot of words. It is synonymous with storytelling. In furtherance of this, the course focuses on the various components and approaches that comprise long-form narrative stories. We’ll dissect great modern and classic magazine stories for story, character arc, dialogue, scenes, structure, transitions, verb tense, point of view and style. We’ll cover pitching articles to editors, research, interviewing techniques, ethics, and many other topics. The goal is to create memorable narrative non-fiction stories that hold a reader’s attention to the last page.

This is a challenging course with a heavy reading load and a high bar for writing assignments, befitting journalism students at New
York University. Seriously, don’t take this course if you don’t want to work. There’s no place to hide. There are a number of assignments, including a profile, first-person narrative, event coverage, in-class writing exercises, a case study involving an in-depth interview with a working journalist, and a 3,000+-word feature story (required capstone) with scenes, character, dialogue, and/or analysis. We’ll do a lot of workshopping in class, and along the way work on your pitches, research, and interview techniques, time management, outlines, editing and multiple drafts, and other challenges that confront the professional non-fiction narrative writer. I will also invite well-known writers to class to talk about their own stories and experiences.

**Learning Objectives**

In this course, students will:

- Demonstrate awareness of journalism’s core ethical values, especially as they relate to long-form narrative writing
- Write clear, accurate and engaging prose in an audience-appropriate manner
- Engage in critical thinking, independence, and creativity appropriate to the role of journalism in a democratic society
- Interview subjects, conduct research, and evaluate information
- Work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness, and diverse perspectives
- Explore the art and craft of feature writing through various real-world assignments
- Learn about story structure, character development, point of view, attribution, and other aspects of good journalistic writing
- Be exposed to some of the finest feature writing from the past and the present
- Gain better command of grammar, punctuation, and story structure
Course Structure

This is a writing workshop. There are lectures, ample discussions and workshopping, as well as pitch sessions and student presentations. Sometimes we’ll do writing exercises in class. Beforehand there is usually required reading. I will explain how to take apart long-form stories for content: the lede, nut graf (if applicable), use of quotes and/or dialogue, character arcs, pacing, point of view, etc., which are integral to writing good long-form features. Meanwhile, in-class quizzes will show you how you’re doing with this.

No midterm or final; the final draft of your capstone is due at the start of our last class.

Course Requirements

It’s simple, really: Just do the reading, come to class prepared, hand in your assignments on time, participate in discussions and complete all the in-class assignments.

We meet only 14 times during the course of a semester and will do some of the most important work in class. Attendance is required. If you cannot make a class due to illness, religious holiday or family issue, alert me ahead of time. Unexcused absences can affect your class grade. Don’t ask if you can come late to class (or miss it completely) because you have an interview scheduled with a source claiming he can only make that time. There is no excuse for not getting in touch with me, and not getting and making up an assignment. Three absences may result in an incomplete or F. And please don’t be late; it’s disrespectful to both your fellow students (and to me).

Our classroom is chockfull of computers to accommodate
everyone. We will use them for in-class work. Or bring your own laptop or equivalent. But silence your cell phone and put it out of sight.

When you’re in class, be present—and by that I don’t just mean physically. For all of us, paying attention is getting harder. Studies show that our attention span has been shrinking (we now have the attention span of a goldfish, according to one study). That’s likely attributable to the plethora of devices at our disposal, which offer almost unlimited and instantaneous choice. Nevertheless, during class is not the time to text, check email, Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat, shop for boots on Amazon, swipe left or right on Tinder… you get the gist. In such a small room it’s easy to see who’s paying attention and who isn’t. (Hint: your eyes can give you away.) I may ask you to leave if you’re using your device for activities other than those that can assist in learning. In that case you would be marked absent that day.

Plagiarism, fabrication, or any other act of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated and could result in a failing grade for the course or expulsion from the university. We have zero tolerance for that here.

**Required Reading**

Over the course of the semester, I’ll provide links to long-form articles and many other resources, which you are required to read. If something isn’t available online or through Bobst’s databases, I’ll email you PDFs.

In addition, we’ll mine the following resources:

Nieman Storyboard: “Why Is This So Good?” Professional writers dissect their favorite feature stories:
[http://niemanstoryboard.org/storyboard-category/why-is-this-so-](http://niemanstoryboard.org/storyboard-category/why-is-this-so-)
good/


The Open Notebook: [https://www.theopennotebook.com/pitch-database/](https://www.theopennotebook.com/pitch-database/)

**Assignments**

1. Profile (1500 words), first draft due Week 5, 2nd draft due week 6 = combined 10% of your final grade.
2. First-person story—an article featuring you (1200 words), due Week 7 = 10%.
3. Cover an event: 1,000-1,500 words), due week 9 = 10%. Cover a protest, interview people transporting voters to the polls, attend a convention, a congressperson or the mayor’s press conference, a local hearing or meeting.
4. Journalist case study (1200 words), due Week 10. Interview a working journalist about a favorite narrative story and write a case study = 10%.
5. Final capstone story (3,000+ words, 3 drafts). 1st draft is due Week 12; 2nd draft: Week 13. Final draft is due exactly one week after the last class meets = 30%. You must file each draft of your capstone on time.
6. Quizzes, modules, Bobst Library Treasure Hunt (combined) = 15%.
7. Class participation = 15%.

**Submit all of the assignments in Microsoft Word. No PDFs, Google Docs, Pages, or any other word processing program.**

Be sure to “slug” your file with your name (last name & first name) and the date the assignment is due, like this:
Accommodations

Students with disabilities that necessitate accommodations should contact and register with New York University’s Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD) at 212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu. Information about the Moses Center can be found at www.nyu.edu/csd. The Moses Center is located at 726 Broadway on the 2nd floor.

Diversity & Inclusion

The Institute is committed to creating an inclusive learning environment. The Institute embraces a notion of intellectual community enriched and enhanced by diversity along a number of dimensions.

A Word on Trigger Warnings

Over the past few years a heated debate has raged in academia (if you can say anything rages in academia) over the use of “trigger warnings.” One common definition of a trigger warning is “a statement at the start of a piece of writing, video, etc., alerting the reader or viewer to the fact that it contains potentially distressing material (often used to introduce a description of such content).”

Trigger warning proponents point out that some students in any given class may have suffered some level of trauma, whether it arises from sexual assault, violence, or other types of abuse. They should therefore receive fair warning when a reading or discussion relates to material that could cause them discomfort.

Trigger warning critics contend that the world is often messy, disturbing, and violent, and that college is a time for intellectual
growth and emotional development. For this to occur, a professor’s role is to challenge students so they learn to engage rationally with arguments, ideas, opinions, and principles they might find upsetting or even deeply offensive.

While NYU does not subscribe to any university-wide position on trigger warnings—the administration advises anyone who might be traumatized by a reading or video to seek appropriate help at the university’s health center—the journalism faculty believes our entire profession should come stamped with a giant trigger warning. Part of what we do as journalists is to seek the truth no matter where it may lead. This sometimes takes us into violent, disturbing places.

In this course we will read and discuss articles and may view video that deal with disturbing themes, which may include sexual assault, war and combat, terrorism, disease, racism, and sexism.

If these are topics you believe could trigger in you any psychological or health problems, you should not take this course.

Also, at times you may find yourself vehemently disagreeing with the writer of an essay, article, feature story, interview subject on camera, another student, a guest, or your professor. I encourage you to speak up and share your perspectives. But do it in a way that fosters mutual respect and be aware that reasonable people can have, at time, views that may appear “extreme” to some.

**The Syllabus**

A syllabus is a guidepost for the semester. While I’ll try to adhere to this schedule we may skip around if the natural flow of the lessons dictate. No class is the same; if you have additional ideas for topics we should cover, I'm all ears. Sometimes links to articles can disappear or change. If so, let me know and I’ll find alternative
sources. While I expect you to read all assigned material that
doesn’t mean we will have the time to discuss everything in class.
Nevertheless, these are high quality stories well worth your
attention. Analyzing them will help make you a better writer.

**Schedule**

*Stories are a communal currency of humanity.* —Tahir Shah, in *Arabian Nights*

**Week 1**

The power of story
Kurt Vonnegut on the shapes of stories
How to dissect feature-length articles: reading as a reader v. reading as a writer (handout)
Ethics: Plagiarism, fabulism, attribution, getting in trouble-ism
Time management tips
Finding topics to write about
The art of the pitch: how to create story pitches to wow editors / Open Notebook (resource)
In-class writing exercise: secrets

**Read for next class:**

“The American Male at Age 10,” by Susan Orlean, Esquire:
[http://m.learning.hccs.edu/faculty/scotty.moore/anth2351/anth-2301-summer-readings/the-american-male-at-age-10](http://m.learning.hccs.edu/faculty/scotty.moore/anth2351/anth-2301-summer-readings/the-american-male-at-age-10)


Stories tell us of what we already knew and forgot, and remind us of what we haven’t yet imagined. —Anne L. Watson

Week 2  The art of the profile
Dissecting stories for structure, style, and technique
Ethics and sources: On-the-record, off-the-record, not-for-attribution, on background; surreptitiously recording conversations
Zooming in vs. wide-angle lens, narrative threads and angles
How to outline long-form narrative features
In-class writing exercise: steps and stairs

For next class:
Come up with a profile subject. Before you pitch in class be sure that you have access. Remember: boring people produce boring stories, so find someone doing something interesting and/or important (Profile is due Week 5).

Read for next class:


**Story is a yearning meeting an obstacle.** —Robert Olen Butler

**Week 3**

Discussion of “Street Smarts,” “The Reckoning,” and “Mute and Alone.”

Story structure: Ledes, nut grafs, scenes, themes, and transitions

In-class writing exercise: early memories

Pitch your profile subject to our in-class editorial board

**Read for next class:**


*Speaking to the subject is the most overrated thing in journalism. I’ve written profiles where you never even meet the person.* — David Remnick

**Week 4**

The art of the write-around: discussion of Christopher Steele, Tiger Woods and “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold”

Pulling together vast amounts of information from disparate sources to create compelling narratives

Status update #1: your final capstone

The importance of specificity in descriptions

In-class exercise: creative character descriptions

Using legal documents as the basis of a story; dealing with law enforcement

**Due next class:**

Your 1200-word profile (I urge you to find a first reader—preferably a professional journalist—to provide extensive and actionable feedback before you file this story to me.)

**Read for next class:**

“The Troll’s Lawyer,” by Adam Penenberg, Wired: [https://www.wired.com/2015/01/the-trolls-lawyer/](https://www.wired.com/2015/01/the-trolls-lawyer/)


In character, in manner, in style, in all things, the supreme excellence is simplicity. —Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Week 5 Due: Your profile (1200 words). I’ll invite several professional editors and writers from major publications to work with you in small groups during our in-class workshop
The Narrative Fallacy
In-class editing exercise: Trimming your prose

Read for next class:


**Due next class:**

2nd draft of your 1200-word profile

**Week 6**

Due: 2nd draft of your profile
Pitching to editors: dos and don’ts
Status update #2: your final capstone
Stunt journalism: We’ll view and discuss the following videos: “Ten Hours of Walking in NYC As a Woman” and “Black Man v. White Man Open Carrying AR-15 Legally
Tips for writing experiential journalism
In-class writing exercise: We’ll form teams to play the Exquisite Corpse game

**Due next class:**

Your first-person story (1200 words) featuring you doing something interesting and written in the first
person. You could write about attending a cat convention and interacting with pet owners or working in a busy restaurant or spend an entire weekend spending only Bitcoin for food and entertainment. Maybe you want to walk on stilts in Times Square for money, dress up as a comic book character and attend a convention, or go to a gun range, fire an assault weapon and tell us what it’s like and how you felt. Whatever you, it should reveal something deeper about you and/or our culture.

Fact-checking module: https://sites.google.com/nyu.edu/nyu-journalism-fact-checking To receive credit you must complete the knowledge check (in NYU Classes).

*Great stories happen to those who can tell them.* —Ira Glass

**Week 7** Bobst Library Treasure Hunt (3 hours). Meet research librarian Katy Boss and me in the Bobst Library Atrium at 11 a.m. sharp to collect your questions. Bring a smartphone and be sure you’ve downloaded a QR reader in advance. Students who earn the three highest scores can redeem their points to buy their way out of a future assignment (restrictions apply). Due at the start of class: Your first-person story and the fact-checking module

**Read for next class:**


**Week 8** Editors & Writers Panel: Pitch your capstone story to editors and writers from major publications who will provide detailed and actionable feedback.
First person v. third person POV
Tips for covering events

**Due next class:**

Cover an event (1,000-1,500 words). Attend a protest, interview people transporting voters to the polls, go to a convention, a congressperson or the mayor’s press conference, a local hearing or meeting, then write about it. This isn’t a hard news assignment; it’s more akin to a *New Yorker* “Talk of the Town.”

Also, line up a journalist to interview for your
journalism case study (due in two weeks). You will receive a handout with journalism case studies that will show you the format.

There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.
—Maya Angelou

Week 9  Due: event coverage story, which we’ll workshop in class
Journalism case studies format
Status update #3: your final capstone
Grammar and punctuation refresher
In-class writing exercise: dreams

Read for next class:


“How History at Devil Hill,” by Arthur Ruhl, Colliers (handout)—a profile of the Wright Brothers in Kitty Hawk, NC (1908)

“The Flying Man: Otto Lilienthal’s Flying Machine,” by Vernon, McClure’s Magazine (handout)—profile of a German professor who invented hand gliding (1894)


Due next class: Journalism case study (1200 words)
There's always room for a story that can transport people to another place. —J.K. Rowling

**Week 10** Due: Journalism case study
Historical non-fiction (how to write about dead people); reconstructing events and combining sources into an engaging narrative
The art of the story memo
Outlining your feature story
In-class writing exercise: “hot takes”

**Read for next class:**


“Consider the Lobster,” by David Foster Wallace,” *Gourmet*:

“Crows Sometimes Have Sex With Their Dead,” by Ed Yong, *The Atlantic*:

“American Communion,” by David Kamp, *Vanity Fair*:

*Those who tell the stories rule the world.* —Hopi proverb
Week 11  TV interviews: We’ll head to the NYU TV studio where you’ll appear on camera as both interviewer and interviewee to talk about your capstones. A professional TV journalist will offer constructive criticism. Making the uninteresting interesting. Structure, structure, structure. Status update #4: your final capstone.

Due next class:

Complete 1st draft of your 3000-word capstone story. No major holes. No typos. Grammar or punctuation should be almost perfect. No extensions.

*Storytelling is the most powerful way to put ideas into the world today.* —Robert McKee

Week 12  Due: First draft of your 3,000-word capstone. I’ll invite professional editors and writers from major publications to work with you in small groups during our in-class workshop. Debriefing: what did you learn from this editing session; how will you approach your 2nd draft?

*Sometimes reality is too complex. Stories give it form.* —Jean Luc Godard

Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it. —Hannah Arendt

**Week 14**  
Due: 3rd draft of your final capstone story (3,000 words)  
Jobs talk: networking, cover letters, resume, interview techniques, and how to get a job in journalism  
Panel discussion on the future of journalism

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