“NEW YORK CHARACTERS” - Spring 2019

Bringing Characters/Communities to Life in the Context of Their Cultures

The Beat

New York University

Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute

Instructor: Vivien Orbach-Smith

Day/Time: Thursdays, 2:30 p.m. - 6:10 p.m.

Location: 20 Cooper Square

Office Hours: After class: and (by appointment) one hour before class

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“New York is the meeting place of the peoples, the only city where you can hardly find a typical American.” Djuna Barnes, American author (1892-1982)

“I live in New York, New York, the city that never shuts up/ in the daylight everything is so gory/ you can hear snatches of stranger’s sorry stories...” Ani Difranco, singer (1970- ), “Cradle and All”

The Goals

In this intensive feature-writing skills course, you’ll learn how to report on one of the most fascinating aspects of New York: its gorgeously diverse people. In declaring a beat, you will be required to immerse yourself in a subject area that will hold your interest throughout the semester, so it’s best if you’re really passionate - or at least really curious - about it - i.e. New Yorkers in the arts, in politics, in religion, in sports, in education, in the fields of fashion/food/religion/commerce/media/criminal justice, and so on. These individuals can be “regular” folks or luminaries, native New Yorkers or members of immigrant communities.

The word “community,” for our purposes, is very broadly defined. Examples from previous semesters:

- Russians of Brighton Beach, Koreans of “Koreatown,” Indians of “Curry Row,” Irish-American New Yorkers, Chassidic Crown Heights, Harlem USA, Chinatown (i.e., a neighborhood/enclave whose residents share common ancestry/land of origin/culture/political or social aims, etc.).
- Refugees in New York, LGBTQ NYC, Christian New Yorkers, Latino New York, Japanese-American Artists, The Disabled Community, New York Poor, Volunteers (i.e. a subculture determined by race/religion/ethnicity/self-identification/artistic, political or social aims, etc.).

You may cover your beat through a variety of lenses, such as:

- profiling individuals who grapple with (or have overcome) personal/communal challenges, i.e. acculturation, discrimination, disability, and/or who contribute to life in NY via their work/activism/artistic endeavors;
- showcasing a community’s institutions or businesses, special events, traditions;
- examining a community’s historical/ethnic/political roots, its pressing social issues.

In each of your pieces, regardless of your focus - an individual, a locale, an organization, an event or an issue - your writing must always capture, above all, the human side of the story - the heart of all outstanding feature journalism. An excellent rule of thumb: come up with a beat “umbrella” that’s wide - but for each individual story, keep your focus narrow.

The goal is learning to craft strong, captivating stories featuring memorable characters and settings - with emphasis upon resourceful news gathering and interviewing; responsible presentation of facts and events; vivid character development, color and detail; coherent structure, impeccable mechanics and artful language. You’ll be called upon not only strengthen your reporting/writing skills, but to broaden your perspective (and your fellow students’) about the varied cultural milieus of your subjects. And as a beat reporter, you’ll also be encourage to display your multimedia mindset and exercise your skill-set as as blogger/social-media user/photographer/videographer.
This class will provide you with opportunities to write stories that are genuinely publishable on subjects that genuinely interest you. You will be encouraged to write creatively and with a strong voice - but your product must retain everything drummed into you in “Inquiry” (like clarity, accuracy, context, attribution) and steer clear of fan-like prose, or - heaven forbid - fictional license.

The Skills

The course will cover the step-by-step process involved in writing various types of features. Topics will include:

- Types of Features
- Art of the Feature Lead
- Nailing the Nut Graf
- Color 101
- Story Ideas: Finding and Following Them
- How to Do a Great Interview
- Getting and Using Strong Quotes
- Crafting the Vivid Profile
- Writing/Talking about Hot-Button Issues (including race, religion, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexual orientation, appearance, age, physical/mental challenges, sexual harassment/violence, criminal/illegal acts.)
- Pitching Pieces, Psyching Out the Market (getting clips, not just grades)
- Responsible Journalism (Real News - getting and providing the facts/context/nuance)
- Covert Agendas (getting wise to manipulation/hype/spin from sources, bosses, PR or media)

We will examine these topics and strengthen your storytelling skills via:

- Deadline, graded feature assignments (two shorter pieces plus a longer and more in-depth final)
- Relentless rewriting
- Lectures (but only the basics, because it’s really about you getting out there to report, write and rewrite!)
- Brainstorming and pitching story ideas (editorial roundtables)
- In-class workshopping and editing
- In-class writing exercises (to develop voice, POV)
- Field assignments (gathering color, covering events, filing on deadline)
- Classic and current readings from a variety of genres and diverse voices
- Guest speakers and group interview opportunities (focusing on rigorous question-prep)
- Individual blogs that chronicle your reporting and illustrate your immersion in your beat
- Story pitches and submissions

The Rules

**Basic Guidelines for Graded Pieces.** Your TWO SHORTER BEAT STORIES will each be 550-750 words. Each piece must contain reporting (quotes from at least 2-3 original sources, although some stories will cry out for more; firsthand observation), research (attributed background from printed or online sources) and color (detail, description). Each story must be submitted as a Word doc in hard copy (< if due on a day that our class meets) and electronically. Each story must be have a minimum of three illustrations, at least one of which should be a photo taken by you; the others can be maps, charts, artwork, stock photos, etc., steering clear of copyright infringement. In your electronic submission, you are encouraged to include slideshows/video/audio/interactive maps/linked materials. **Your FINAL PIECE** will be a 1000-1300-word, more in-depth story requiring additional sources and illustrations. At the end of all of your pieces, please write an informal paragraph - even 2-3 sentences - describing “**What I Learned**” from writing this story - the key challenges you faced in pursuing/crafting it, what you might do differently next time.

**Rewrites.** Rewriting is an essential part of the writing process. That said, I don’t consider anything you hand in to me a “first draft”; I expect your best effort on the first go-round. Count on every story requiring a rewrite, be it minor tweaking or major overhaul. Check your calendar for the deadlines.

**Deadlines.** Meeting deadlines is critical to a writer’s success. **Under most circumstances, missing a deadline will lower your grade.** If you can’t make it to class, it is your responsibility to get your story or rewrite to me via email. **In order to meet deadlines, you must get into the habit of initiating contact with your interview source(s) immediately after receiving a go-ahead on any assignment.** Phone-tag, broken appointments,
unanswered emails, etc., are to be expected - they're part of this business. (Remember: the more high-profile your source, the longer it will take to make contact and get on his/her calendar - or get turned down.) Always give yourself ample time to switch sources, approaches, or even assignments, if need be, without blowing your deadline. Think of all of your stories/rewrites as several pots “simmering” on the stove at the same time. You can’t afford to wait until one is done before turning your attention to the next.

**Format.** Each story must be double-spaced with your name, a slug and a page number in the upper left corner of every page. On the first page, include a word-count; on the last page, list your sources’ names/titles/contact info. Please staple your stories. When e-mailing me your work, paste it into the body of the e-mail in attachment it. Electronic submissions must be properly labeled: YourName.Story#.Topic.doc. (Example: SmithV_Story1.SalsaDJ.doc.) If it's a rewrite you're sending, this, too, must be noted in the doc's title. (SmithV_S1.SalsaDJrewrite.doc.) It's fine if you depart from this format, as long as your version has the necessary elements that will help me identify your stories. Mystery attachments with names like “profile.doc” might not be read, and may be marked late.

**In-Class Writing/Attendance/Class Participation.** In-class assignments will typically be 250-500 words and graded only with a check/check plus/check minus, to encourage you to take risks and develop your voice. However, (the best of) your in-class writing will form the basis of a fourth letter grade to be averaged in with your three graded pieces. I cannot emphasize strongly enough that it is in your best interest to come to class, and to engage. When there’s engagement, the collaborative energy of our “newsroom” will boost your creativity. We will regularly employ a workshop approach in class to ensure that everyone’s work receives attention, and to train you to think and speak critically and respectfully about newsgathering and writing. In-class writing cannot be made up if you are absent.

**Your Beat Blog, Twitter.** Develop a place to aggregate materials about your beat – your original work (interviews, reflections, reporting notes, photography, video, etc.) and outside source-materials (links to articles, events, videos – anything related to your beat). You are expected to post on your blog most Wednesdays - more often, if you are so inclined. Add your blog’s url to your signature when emailing possible sources – they’re more likely to respond affirmatively to your requests for interviews/quotes when they note your immersion in the beat. Some examples from previous semesters: https://blackwomenofnyc.wordpress.com https://anythingwesynthesize.wordpress.com/blog/ http://littlerussiablog.wordpress.com/ https://photographyinnyc.wordpress.com/ https://afrika2bk.wordpress.com https://jikumamoto.wordpress.com/ If you Tweet: following and engaging with thought-leaders in your beat is an excellent way to stay current. If you don’t Tweet: start.

**Grading the Stories.** What I am looking for in each of you - regardless of your individual starting point – is a steady arc of improvement and growth over the course of the semester. Happily, where there is commitment, this almost always occurs. Keep up with the work so you do not become overwhelmed, and you should do well. If at any time during the semester you are encountering difficulties, email me immediately - don’t even wait until the next class meeting.

Your grade for each piece will consist of an approximate average of your original submission and your rewrite. Typically, a piece in the “A+/A” range reads like publishable work from the get-go; it’s a very strong story requiring only minor editorial input (from me) and a relatively light rewrite (by you). A story in the “B+/B” range is one that required more extensive editorial input/rewrite in order to be publishable (or close to it). A story in the “B-/C+” range is one that - even after major editorial input/rewrite - would still need significantly more work in order to be publishable. And a piece graded “C” or below, is one that would need a lot more rewriting before it could be considered for publication (for reasons are usually explained in a detailed edit/critique).

In a course like this, grades cannot be determined with the use of a calculator. I can only pledge to approach each of your stories with the high standards, sharp eye and open mind of a fair, discerning editor. If you do poorly on a particular assignment, it doesn’t mean you are a bad writer; it means that one story needs improvement. And with perseverance and practice, you will improve.
Final Grade. Course work will be weighted as follows:

- Two graded features/rewrites: 35%
- In-class writing assignments, multimedia project, blog, class participation: 30%
- Final feature: 35%

Students who demonstrate very strong commitment to the course are likely to see this rewarded in a final grade that is slightly higher than the average of their graded pieces. (This refers to students who consistently pursue challenging stories, display significant effort/improvement in rewrites, contribute to discussions/workshopping, have excellent attendance, always meet deadlines, and post regularly on their blogs.) Similarly, final grades may be negatively impacted by late or missing assignments, shallow stories with too-few sources and lacking in illustrations, and/or poor attendance.

Missing more than four classes (i.e. more than two sessions of a class that meets once a week) during the semester, missing two graded assignments, or breaching the ethics of journalism by plagiarizing, are all grounds for an F. This Institute has a zero tolerance policy on plagiarism (passing off someone else’s writing/reporting as your own, lifting descriptions/quotes from publications without attribution, or “inventing” sources/quotes).

Basic Skills. No matter how hard-working, ambitious and/or talented you are, you cannot do well in this course, or in journalism, without a solid grounding in the mechanics of the English language: the fundamentals of grammar, punctuation, correct word-usage. There are many reasons why some individuals may have deficits, to varying degrees, in these basics. If you are one of them and you wish to pursue this major, it is imperative that you now focus seriously and independently on improving. Read Strunk and White (The Elements of Style), study your Stylebook, consider going to NYU’s Writing Center for extra help.

The Readings

You should have access to (and routinely refer to) a recent printing of The AP Stylebook. If you haven’t read William Zinsser’s On Writing Well for a previous course, do so now.

Books. Any or all of these books are excellent inspiration for writing about multicultural New York:
- Hamill, Pete. Downtown: My Manhattan
- Auletta, Ken. The Streets Were Paved with Gold
- Kazin, Alfred. A Walker in the City
- Anatole Broyard. Kafka Was the Rage
- Jordan, June. Soldier: A Poet’s Childhood
- Thomas, Piri. Down These Mean Streets

Handouts and email links. I’ll provide you with lots of useful articles about writing and an eclectic assortment of worthwhile feature stories. But they only help if you read them. Reading the greats can help you become a better writer and a better person. And even the pretty standard stuff can get you thinking (“Hey, I can do that!”) about how and where to market your work. We’ll discuss some of the readings, but you be tested on them? No. When feature-writing students don’t read, it is glaringly obvious in the quality of their work. Habitual readers know more about the world and they’re rarely at a loss for story ideas. They write more engagingly and make fewer grammatical errors.

Newspapers and Magazines. Excellent journalists stay informed, inspired, aggravated - so I urge you to read just about every newspaper and magazine you can get your hands on. You are expected to read the New York Times daily. Every hard-news story is brimming with feature possibilities. Ads, too, are a goldmine of feature ideas, and among the obituaries you’ll find some of the most involving profiles you’ll ever read. Of course: The New Yorker, Atlantic, Harper’s, Vanity Fair, New York Magazine, the Wall Street Journal and the New York Observer run terrific features as well. Every. Sure, you can read the online versions; follow them on Twitter. But once in a while, treat yourself to something beautiful made out of paper.


No “Incompletes” are given in this course.
The only exception is for a documented medical or family emergency.

“There is nothing to writing. All you do is it down at a typewriter and open a vein.”
Red Smith (American sportswriter, 1905-1982)

“A writer is a person for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.”
Thomas Mann (German author, 1875-1955)


“Pick an issue. Study it. Figure out who the decision-makers you want to influence are. Name the guilty men. Make alliances with experts. Combine activism with the writing. Create a constituency for reform. And don’t stop ’til you have achieved some progress…”
Jack Newfield (New York investigative reporter, 1938-2004)

“The most essential gift for a good writer is a built-in, shock-proof shit detector.”
Ernest Hemingway (American author-journalist, 1899-1961)

“Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it.”
Hannah Arendt (German-American political theorist, 1906-1975)

“In conversation you can use timing, a look, an inflection. But on the page all you have is commas, dashes, the amount of syllables in a word. When I write, I read everything out loud to get the right rhythm.”
Fran Lebowitz (essayist-humorist, 1950- )

“For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us.”
Audre Lord