New York University
Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute
Syllabus JOUR-GA 1021 007
WRITING & REPORTING WORKSHOP I
CULTURAL REPORTING AND CRITICISM
Fall 2019
Professor: Johnny Dwyer
Friday 9:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m. - Room 655

To contact professor:
20 Cooper Square
New York, New York
Phone: 917-570-7563
Office hours: Friday 2-3:00 p.m., or by appointment

Course overview

Description
This course teaches cultural journalists the essentials of news reporting: the skills and conventions of journalistic practice across media platforms. Whether your reported work is published, posted or broadcast, you’ll need to work from the same ground rules as your editors, producers, sources and readers, and to master a repertoire of basic forms.

This semester we will tackle two of those forms: the news report and the feature, producing pieces for print, web and an audio. As you do this, we will test and question the conventional practices of reporters and editors, and examine how those practices are changing as journalism adapts to the information environment.

This course will teach you the aggressive reporting skills to break through the prevailing narratives—whether those are packaged up by public relations representatives and official spokespersons or perpetuated by your own colleagues. You will learn how to develop sources and use them to learn reliable and meaningful information.

Reporting is learned through practice. In addition to reading news stories and learning the fundamental writing conventions of news reporting, you’ll be asked to go out on the street to bring back your own stories.

You will also get a handle on news judgment—not just deciding what stories are worth covering, but making careful decisions about what details to focus on in a story and what to leave out. We’ll integrate reporting and analysis, ensuring that
each reinforces the other to maximum effect.

You'll learn to synthesize complex information into clear, concise, compelling and accurate articles.

**Learning Objectives**

In this course, students will:

- Demonstrate awareness of journalism’s core ethical values
- Identify, evaluate and interview subjects, conduct research, and assess the quality of information
- Write clear, accurate and engaging prose in news and feature stories
- Demonstrate critical thinking, independence, and creativity appropriate to the role of journalism in a democratic society
- Work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness, and diverse perspectives
- Use technological tools and apply quantitative concepts to reporting

**Course Structure**

Each class session will be divided into two segments. The first part will consist of a seminar session on a building block of journalistic practice. You will spend the remaining class time working on stories both in and out of class, and in one-on-one editorial meetings. The class will offer feature guest speakers, to be announced.

Editorial meetings are an essential component of the class. Each student is expected to have a minimum of three meetings with the instructor.

Three class sessions will focus on audio writing and production.

**Readings**

The required texts for the course are:

(Available at: [Bobst Library](#) and [Amazon](#))

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Optional and recommended texts are:


As a reporter, you will need to develop and maintain fluency in both the practice and culture of journalism. The foundation of this is the media you consume.

At minimum, read one national newspaper each day. *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal* offer student subscriptions. Weekly and monthly news magazines to follow online or in print include *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The National Review*, and *The Nation*. (*Bobst Library* has a periodical reading room where you can find these.)

Online publications often break news and cover stories overlooked by traditional media: *ProPublica*, *The Intercept*, *Buzzfeed News*. Aggregators are useful to track trending stories and quality reporting: *Memeorandum* and *Longform*.

Also, listen to journalism podcasts: the best on journalistic practice include *The Daily* and *Longform*. And, finally, immerse yourself in the popular culture of journalism. Each week, *Slack* will include a documentary or nonfiction film which discusses journalism. Suggested, not mandatory viewing.

**Course Requirements**

Attendance and regular in-class participation are both mandatory, and will count for one-fourth of your grade. Missing a class will result in an F for the day. Missing more than two classes during the semester will result in a drop of your final grade by one letter grade. Punctuality is also required. Lateness for class will have a negative impact on your grade.

Writing assignments, which will account for the rest of the grade, will be evaluated for accuracy, use of language, and adherence to fundamental principles of fair reporting. As is the case in any newsroom, deadlines must be met. Late assignments will be penalized. Every assignment should be submitted on *NYU Classes* by deadline.

What the grades mean:

A = Professional quality; ready to show to an editor
B = On the right track but still missing a fundamental element; needs additional work
C and below = A serious liability stands between you and a publishable story; fixing will require a shift in approach or concept
Accuracy is the highest value in journalism. You need to get the story first, and you need to get it right. You must check and recheck every fact in your reporting—including the spelling of names. Writing assignments containing gross inaccuracies will receive an F.

**Grading**

Final grades will be calculated as follows:

- Attendance & participation: 20%
- Community Story - Due: 9/18/19 (before midnight) - 10%
  A 500-word "reaction" piece on a meeting of a New York City Community Board (or community organization, pending approval). (Revision due: 9/27/19)
- AP Daybook Story - Due: 9/20/19 (before midnight) - 10%
  A 500-word piece about an event taken from the Associated Press Daybook. (Revision due: 10/4/19)
- Explainer Story - Due: 10/2/18 (before midnight) - 10%
  A 650-word story explaining a concept, event, phenomena or trend that manifests locally. (Revision due: 10/11/18)
- Controversy Story - Due: 10/16/18 (before midnight) - 15%
  A 650-word story on a local controversy (or the local manifestation of a larger controversy). (Revision due: 10/30/18)
- Audio Story - Due: 11/8/18 (before midnight) - 15%
  A three-minute audio story (requirements to be provided by instructor).
- Feature Story - Due: 11/11/18 (before midnight) - 20%
  A 1,500-2,000-word news-driven feature on a local trend, figure, or topic. (Final revision due: 12/11/18)
9/6/2019  What is news, and what is it for?
What news is and who decides what is newsworthy; The ethics, culture and values of the newsroom; the evolution of news writing as a form; the convention of objectivity; the emerging ethos of "fair;" basic tools and techniques; how to report a reaction story

Readings to be completed for class
- "Reporting," a chapter from Samuel G. Freedman’s Letters to a Young Journalist
- Society of Professional Journalists’ “Code of Ethics”
- “Legal Principles of Publication” AP Stylebook (pp. 456-469)
- “Black families once lived off their southern farmland. Their descendants are struggling to hold onto it” by Korsha Wilson, The Washington Post

Assignments for the following week
- Community Board meeting reaction story. Select a Community Board outside of Manhattan; bring reporting notes to class on September 14
- Begin looking for explainer and controversy story ideas

9/13/2019  The basics – putting the story together and being fair
The elements of a news story; writing a lede; quotes and attribution basics; beginning to build story judgment (review AP day schedule, pick event, justify choice)

Readings to be completed for class
- “The Inverted Pyramid,” “Quotations and Attributions,” on quoting and attribution and “Leads and Nut Graphs” from News Reporting and Writing, the Missouri Group
- “Gallery of of good ledes, recommendation edition” by Kristen Hare Poynter

In-class writing
- Community Board Meeting reaction story

Assignments for the following week
- Community Board Meeting reaction story
9/20/2019  Developing story ideas and interviewing
News judgment; story development; where to get ideas; the PR machine: when/what to embrace, when to avoid; “Explainer” stories -- What makes them work? How are the ideas selected and why? Identifying sources; preparing for the interview; balancing points of view; what questions to always ask; quotes and attribution part two

Readings to be completed for class
- “Interviewing,” from News Reporting and Writing for Today’s Media
- Sample explainers:
  - “The opioid epidemic, explained” Vox

In-class writing
- Revise AP daybook story.

Assignments for the following week
- Revision of AP daybook story.
- Come to class prepared to verbally pitch your “explainer” story idea. Please complete this pitch worksheet and share with me.
- Controversy story idea(s): one/two-sentence description. (Share as Google document with me.)

9/27/2019  Research techniques and pitching stories
Using databases (Lexis/Nexis, ProQuest, Factiva); backgrounding; using previously published work; identifying stories within published work; litigation and criminal records; property and business records; freedom of information laws; how the courts work; how to write a query; how to pre-report; approaching editors

Readings to be completed for class
- “Civil Cases,” from News Reporting and Writing
Freedom of Information Act sample request

**Guest speaker(s):**
- NYU journalism librarian Katy Boss in Lab 619 at Bobst Library (12:30 p.m.)

**In class:**
- Discussion of court cases, readings, and how to write a pitch letter.
- Discussion of FOIA/FOIL, online resources, preparation of a FOIA and appeal.
- Explainer pitches.

**Assignments**
- Explainer story
- Controversy written pitches

**10/4/2019 Interview with a newsmaker**
Discussion and interview a newsmaker.

**Readings:**
- “Reporting with Numbers,” from *Telling the Story*, the Missouri Group
- “The Battle for Grace Church,” Jessica Pressler, *New York Magazine*

**In class:**
- Speaker, writing exercise after guest speaker. Group review of explainers, group pitch of controversy stories.

**Assignments**
- Explainer revisions

**10/11/2019 Developing human sources and interpreting data**
Identifying access opportunities; finding shared interest; creating a two-way relationship; what can you offer besides publicity?; avoiding ax-grinders; on/off record; an introduction to data journalism

**Readings:**
- “Data Journalism” AP Stylebook (pp. 332-337)
- “Behind the Scenes at the Guardian Datablog” and “Data Journalism at the BBC”
In class:
- Discussion of readings. Data visualization presentation and exercise. Work on controversy stories in class.

Assignments
- Controversy story

10/18/2019  Audio Journalism session I
Reporting with sound; meet your equipment; choosing and capturing a subject.

Instructors:

Assignments
- See audio syllabus

10/25/2019  Audio Journalism session II
Intro to ProTools; assemble sequence; begin writing script

Assignments
- See audio syllabus

11/1/2019  Feature reporting and writing
Structuring the feature; dissection of readings; finding your work process; how to organize your research and manage your time

Readings:
- “Learning to Speak Lingerie” Peter Hessler, The New Yorker
- “Trashed: Inside the Deadly World of Private Garbage Collection” by Kiera Feldman, Propublica
- The Journalist and the Murderer, Janet Malcolm

In class:
- Pitch feature stories via pitch letter. Class discussion, followed by individual meetings.

11/8/2019  Audio Journalism session III
Assemble and polish segment, including voice track; listening session; how to put podcast skills to work
11/15/2019  Feature reporting and writing II
Revisions; working with an editor

Readings:
● “An Unbelievable Story of Rape,” Ken Armstrong T. Christian Miller, The Marshall Project and Propublica; also, listen to Longform podcast on reporting process and “Anatomy of Doubt” This American Life

In class:
● Individual meetings about feature stories.

Assignments
● Feature story

NO CLASS NOVEMBER 22 - THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY

11/29/2019  Where reporter meets commentator
Writing reported pieces with a point of view; where and how to bring in personal opinions; building an argument on a foundation of fact; staking out idea turf; review drafts; summarize the story; find the focus; identify where to dig deeper, and how to get there; identify and cut off dead ends

Readings:
● “A Most American Terrorist” Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, GQ
● “Consider the Lobster,” David Foster Wallace, Gourmet
● “Michael Pollan” Episode 347, Longform

In class:
● Discussion of readings; group discussion of feature stories. Individual meetings about feature stories.

Assignments
● Feature revisions

12/6/2019  Ethics, Libel and Journalistic Flameouts
Media ethics – the golden rules; media law – libel, privacy; good practices; social media and its uses/abuses, reporting and editing catastrophes

Readings:
● “Briefing on Media Law” AP Stylebook
● “A Rape on Campus” Sabrina Rubin Erderly, Rolling Stone, “Rolling Stone and UVA: The Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism Report” (up until “How Else Do You Suggest I Find Out?”)
● “How an Affair Between a Reporter and a Security Aide Has Rattled Washington Media” multiple bylines, The New York Times and “Is it OK to sleep with Sources?” Jack Schafer, Politico

In class:
● Discussion of readings, editing workshop for feature stories.

12/13/2019  The Job
Discussion of readings and the workplace

Readings:
● “Seven Years as a Freelance Writer, or, How to Make Vitamin Soup,” Richard Morgan
● Say Nothing, Patrick Radden Keefe

Reminder: Feature Story - Final Draft - 12/13/19

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 mosecsd@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.