Course Description

This course will teach you how to create in-depth works of narrative nonfiction, the lifeblood of journalism’s most envied outlets. For an entire semester, we’ll chip away at all the labor that goes into producing such complex projects. We’ll be learning how to shape original ideas that will grab editors’ attention; how to report in the face of difficult circumstances; how to hack your way to an effective structure during the outlining process; and how to cope with the inevitable frustrations of writing on tight deadlines. At the end of the semester, you will have completed a 3,000- to 5,000-word longform capstone project that will apply everything you have learned in your time in the program (more below).

The basic organizing principle of this course will be the lifespan of a long-form story. We’ll start by putting our heads together to come up with story concepts, and then in each successive week take another step through the process: honing pitches, plotting research, developing sources, outlining, writing, fact-checking, etc. To help you dive into those tasks, we’ll be spending approximately a quarter our class time each week discussing great works of journalism; I’ll be assigning three to four stories from the syllabus to read in advance of class each week. But this is a practical course, and the main thrust will be to teach you how to report and write every bit as well as the longform masters whose work has affected you through the years.

Master’s Capstone

To successfully finish this master's program, each student must complete a Master’s capstone project. This capstone will challenge you in ways you can scarcely imagine. It should take everything you have learned throughout the course of this graduate program and apply it to a 3,000- to 5,000-word long-form narrative feature article. It must display a mastery of the topic, deep reporting and research, multiple deep-dive interviews with several human sources, an intricate yet workable story structure, characters and story arcs, and high quality writing.

This capstone provides students opportunities to apply:

- Knowledge and theory they have learned to real-world settings.
- Research and interviewing techniques, writing craft and technical skills they have
gleaned from their time throughout this program to publishable works of narrative non-fiction.

Because the master’s capstone is a major undertaking, I will be available to consult with each student along the way—from the initial idea and pitch to the reporting, research, interviews, outlining your structure, the writing process and fact-checking. We will meet in one-on-one meetings, as well as in small groups outside of class.

After the semester concludes, the American Journalism Online Master’s Program will strip out the names on each article and hire professional journalists to read and rate each one. This is to ensure that students are indeed learning.

Learning Objectives

- To understand the many steps that go into the act of creating longform narratives, so that we’re all prepared to tackle such projects ourselves.
- To recognize what kinds of story ideas are likeliest to lead to paying assignments, and to develop the skills necessary to present those ideas in effective pitches.
- To develop the confidence and insight required to report stories involving reluctant sources, complex concepts, and elusive facts.
- To acquire skill in retrieving documentary sources that can’t be obtained with straightforward internet searches (e.g. via public-records requests).
- To learn how best to prepare for the writing process by organizing voluminous materials and selecting the right narrative structure.
- To produce first drafts that are clean enough to convince editors to push forward with your projects.
- To gain experience in attacking multiple revisions, so that each successive draft is stronger and tighter than the last.
- To understand the nuances of the professional fact-checking process.
- To be able to transition from the magazine world to the book world, which involves writing detailed proposals that are sales documents as well as minor works of art.
- To have a sense of how to turn longform narrative into a viable long-term business, by developing secondary revenue streams such as film/TV rights, books, podcasts, etc.

Course Structure

We’re only going to have a 14-week semester to learn a complex craft, so our workload may seem intense at times. We’ll be meeting for approximately three to three-and-a-half hours each week, but you’ll need to set aside six to eight additional hours per week to handle a range of assignments. By far the most important of those will be your final capstone story; it should be strong enough to be published in the sort of publication that receives scores of manuscripts and queries every day.

Our weekly meetings will consist of two distinct parts. For the half-hour or so of class
time, we’ll be discussing the three to four stories you were asked to read for the week. Prior to coming to class, you will already have offered at least one comment on our #longform channel on Slack. I will get the discussion going on each story by posting a question that should stretch your thinking about reporting, structure, and prose. When we gather in class, we’ll use those Slack comments as jumping-off points to lead our analysis. By dissecting these great works of longform narrative, we will hopefully come to understand the small yet vital creative choices that make certain works more memorable than others. (By the way, don’t sweat it if you hate some of the stories I’ve selected; please just be honest with your opinions and offer cogent reasons for your distaste. Long-form is a big tent, and even the most lauded stories will inevitably have their detractors.)

During the last three-quarters of each class, we’ll focus on developing the essential skills of our craft. I’ll typically start by walking you through a Keynote presentation containing pointers and examples, after which we’ll have a detailed discussion about how to apply these lessons to your own work. Toward the end of the class period, we’ll talk about the assignment for the upcoming week.

As we get deeper into the semester and you’re immersed in your final project, our Tuesday class may run slightly longer so we can compare notes and workshop each other’s drafts. If that added class time isn’t sufficient to address your questions, you can always reach out to me to set up a one-on-one appointment—much in the same way you’d reach out to a magazine or book editor to go over a thorny reporting or writing problem that you’re confronting.

Even if you don’t think you need extra help, plan on having at least one 15-20 minute office-hours session with me every two to three weeks. At the very least, I want to be able to understand where you are in the creative process, and to help you spot any potential obstacles that may lay in your way. You may find that talking things through, even when you feel like you have the situation under control, may help you identify a weakness or an opportunity that you didn’t previously recognize.

Lastly, I’m planning to have at least two special guests come in to talk about their experiences in longform. I’m tentatively aiming to have these writers visit during the second half of the semester, when you’re deep into working on your final stories. I will keep you posted on the details as they emerge.

**Readings**

I have selected 37 longform stories to comprise the bulk of our reading this semester. All of these pieces will be listed in a booklet that I’ll be sharing via our Slack channel; the document will contain links to either view or download the material. (My thanks to the NYU library staff for digging up a few of the hard-to-get ones, such as the stories from *Granta*.)

Toward the end of the semester, we will also be reading a narrative nonfiction book
proposal, so you can get a feel for that format. I will post a PDF of the proposal once I’ve
selected it; I’m currently looking at a few options and need to get permission from the
authors before sharing with the class.

As supplementary material, I highly recommend listening to past episodes of the
Longform Podcast (https://longform.org/podcast). Here are a few of my favorites:

Matthew Power: https://longform.org/posts/longform-podcast-29-matthew-power

Jon Mooallem: https://longform.org/posts/longform-podcast-384-jon-mooallem

Alex Mar: https://longform.org/posts/longform-podcast-349-alex-mar

Elizabeth Kolbert: https://longform.org/posts/longform-podcast-315-elizabeth-kolbert

Vanessa Grigoriadis: https://longform.org/posts/longform-podcast-264-vanessa-grigoriadis

Ta-Nehisi Coates: https://longform.org/posts/longform-podcast-225-ta-nehisi-coates

Adrian Chen: https://longform.org/posts/longform-podcast-171-adrian-chen

Course Requirements

The obvious stuff first: Please show up for class, be on time, and participate. If you
absolutely cannot make a session, or you have something going on that is affecting your
ability to be involved to the fullest extent, let me know. I understand that all of our lives
are complicated, and I’m always willing to work with you. But please don’t ghost this
class or put in minimal effort then make excuses later.

It’s critical that everyone speak up during our discussions—and, more important, that we
don’t talk over one another or otherwise treat each other with disrespect. It’s okay to have
differences of opinion with your classmates, or with me; we all have different ideas of
what constitutes the best longform writing, and we will all champion different authors or
creative approaches. But, please, let’s listen to each other, and learn from each other.

It should also go without saying that you need to come to class with your weekly
assignments done. In fact, you’ll generally be expected to turn in your assignments, via
the Google Drive app on Slack, every Tuesday morning by noon Eastern time. That way,
I’ll be able to review everyone’s work in advance of our meeting, which will help me
steer each student in the right direction. (Feel free to submit your work in any format
you’d like, though I’d prefer ones that are easily compatible with Google Docs.)

You will also be expected to participate in our Slack channel between classes. Every
week, you should post at least one or two thoughts on the stories we’re reading; you can
do so in response to the study questions I’ll be sharing, or just offer whatever opinions
are on your mind. I will do my best to reply to everyone’s post and get you thinking about how the assigned stories can help shape your own work.

Above all, it’s important that you get your final story to me on time. I realize that will be easier said than done—writing a long-form piece is always a supreme challenge, and even more so when you’re relatively new to the craft. But think of yourself as being a professional journalist on deadline: Your editor and your publisher are depending on you to turn in the story as promised, or they’ll have a gaping hole in the middle of their October issue. Don’t let them down!

**Grading & Assignments**

Class attendance and participation: 25%*
Weekly assignments: 15%
Mini-feature: 10%
Final story: 50%

*This will include participation in our web forum as well as in periodic one-on-one sessions.

**Grading Scale**

97-100%: A+
93-96%: A
90-92%: A-
87-89%: B+
83-86%: B
80-82%: B-
77-79%: C+
73-76%: C
70-72%: C-
67-69%: D+
65-66%: D
Below 75%: F

*Note, you must maintain a 3.0 (B-average) to remain academically eligible in the program.

**Zoom Etiquette**

By now, we’ll assume you have a basic understanding of Zoom. You know enough to sit within range of your router and to dress appropriately for class. Treat classes held on Zoom like you would in-person classes. Don’t forget that while you are watching your professor and classmates on Zoom, they can also see and hear you.

**Points to remember:**
• Your video camera must be switched on while class is in session. If your camera is not on, it’s like you are not there. Sure, it’s fine to turn it off temporarily while you go to the bathroom, but it’s not ok to keep it off for any extended period of time to make a sandwich, run out to the corner bodega for some Doritos, or take a nap.

• Don’t multitask during class. Want to know a secret? Your instructor (and fellow students) can tell if you’re not paying attention. While it may seem no one will know if you pull up a fresh browser window to shop for shoes on Amazon, text with friends, or post pics to Instagram, your eyes give you away.

• Mute your microphone until it’s your turn to speak. That way your peers won’t be able to hear your roommate blasting Lizzo, the pounding jackhammers at the construction site across the street, or the caterwaul of sirens from passing fire trucks.

• Good lighting is key. Your apartment is not a movie set, but don’t sit with your back to a window, where sunlight can wash out your features. On the other extreme, a dark room will make you appear morose. Choose a well-lit room so everyone can see your face.

• Don’t overexpose your life. You can choose a background image so that people don’t have to see your messy bedroom. We don’t regulate these, but please be respectful of your classmates and professor. We understand that a spouse, child, roommate or pet may briefly pass through your screen. But don’t allow your dog, cat or ferret hijack class. He may be cute, but he isn’t receiving course credit.

• Treat your classmates with respect. Treat your professor with respect. Don’t do anything in a Zoom class you wouldn’t do in an in-person classroom.

Follow these guidelines and you may find remote learning as engaging—if not more so—than in-person classes.

**Academic Honesty**

All work (homework included) submitted by the student shall be his/her own work. Work taken from others shall be deemed as unacceptable. Any doubts will initiate a ZERO on the required effort.

As a journalism student at New York University, you are part of a community of scholars at a university recognized for its research. A scholar’s mission is to push forward the boundaries of knowledge; a journalist’s mission is to serve the public by seeking out and reporting the facts as accurately as possible. Good journalists and scholars share a commitment to the same principle: integrity in their work.

By enrolling in this course you agree to maintain the highest standards of honesty and foster ethical behavior at all times. Anyone who fails to uphold these ethical standards has committed a serious violation of this agreement. Penalties can range from an F on an assignment to a failing grade in a course to expulsion from the University, depending on the decision of the instructor in consultation with the director of the American Journalism Online Master’s Program at NYU and deans at the Graduate School of Arts & Science.
All work submitted by students shall be their own work. When working on teams, each student is responsible for contributing original work.

Examples of unacceptable activities can include (but are not limited to):

● Plagiarism: Attempting to pass off someone else’s words, audio, video, art, graphics or ideas as your own without proper attribution or acknowledgement. In both journalism and academia, this is akin to theft. Examples: copying in whole or in part material created by someone else, borrowing language or concepts, lifting quotes, recordings, graphics, photos, sound effects or music without proper attribution.

● Fabrication: Making up information, faking anecdotes or sources, falsifying quotes, creating fictitious sources, citing non-existent information or fudging data.

● Multiple submission: Recycling assignments from one class for use in another, or submitting assignments to one class derived from research in another without prior approval from all professors involved. A student may not take published material and pass it off as fresh material.

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.

Diversity & Inclusion

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

A Note on Flexibility

I’ve done my best to schedule our entire semester to the hilt, but let’s face it: Life is bound to intervene at some point, and things will get shaken up as a result. So please bear with me if I decide to swap in a new story to read, announce a guest at the last moment, or otherwise change the syllabus. I promise that any alterations I make will be done to make the class as informative and engaging as possible.

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Class Schedule

Week 1: Introduction, Expectations, and The Seven Pillars of Longform

We will start by learning about one another: Who we are, where we come from, what experience we’ve had with writing and/or journalism, and why we felt compelled to get involved with this class. I’d also very much like to hear what longform stories have made the most impact on you, and
why. We’ll then segue to a discussion of what will be expected this semester.

The bulk of the class will be taken up with an introduction to the seven pillars of longform: idea generation, pitching, reporting/researching, organizing, writing, revising, and fact-checking. We will pay closest attention to the first two of those pillars, as the following week we’ll be selecting ideas for our first major writing assignment (the mini-feature).

**Writing:** Prepare a three-paragraph pitch for your 1,200-word mini-feature. Please turn in by noon on the day of class.

**Reading:**
Reminder: All readings are posted on our course site.

- Katherine Boo, “After Welfare,” *The New Yorker*
- Alfred Lawrie, “Eating Glass,” *Granta*
- Kelefa Sanneh, “Where’s Earl?” *The New Yorker*

**Week 2: Ideas and Pitches**

After our regular story discussion, we’ll workshop your mini-feature pitches and discuss how to select story ideas that will resonate with editors. We’ll also explore the inner working of how magazines select which stories to assign.

**Writing:** Begin reporting on your mini-feature, which will be due on Week 4. Plan to turn in a one-page memo on your progress in advance of next week’s class.

**Reading:**
Reminder: Share your comments on readings in our #longform Slack channel!

- Aleksander Hemon, “The Aquarium,” *The New Yorker*
- Dave McKenna, “James Dolan Wants You to Love His Band,” *Deadspin*

**Week 3: The Ins and Outs of Reporting: Developing Sources, Tracking Down Leads, and Cutting Through the BS**

Now that you’re in the thick of reporting your first story, we’ll be discussing how to get the information and details that will make your work sing. We’ll primarily focus on how to track down sources, convince them to go on-the-record, and then interview them effectively. We’ll also talk about how to manage relationships with sources over the long-term, as well as how to organize the notes that you accumulate during the reporting process.
Writing: Continue to report your mini-feature, and start preparing to write if you feel like you’ve accumulated enough information.

Draw up a list of five ideas that you’d like to pursue for your final story. Two sentences on each should be fine.

Reading:
- Lawrence Wright, “The Apostate,” *The New Yorker*
- Keira Feldman, “Trashed,” *ProPublica*

**Week 4: Reporting II: Paper Trails and Dotting Your I’s & Polishing Your Feature Ideas**

Now that you’re wrapping up your mini-feature reporting, we’ll be discussing how to obtain documents and other artifacts that can be crucial to longform storytelling. We’ll go over how to file public-records requests, how to make the most of archives, and how to know which experts to trust.

We will also go over your list of feature ideas, so that we’re ready to hit the ground running on the final project after your mini-feature is complete.

Writing: Write your mini-feature! Please make sure that it is turned in by noon Eastern time on the day before class), so I can review the stories ahead of our class. We will be workshopping the stories on deadline day.

Reading:
- Adrian Chen, “Unfollow,” *The New Yorker*
- Hanna Rosin, “Murder by Craigslist,” *The Atlantic*

**Week 5: In-Depth Interviewing for Long-Form Narrative Projects: Getting sources to share details, emotions, and thoughts.**

We’ll read transcripts of in-depth interviews that led to published stories. Then we’ll break into pairs to interview one another about deep, dark secrets from your pasts.

Writing: Continue to report your mini-feature, and start preparing to write if you feel like you’ve accumulated enough information.

Reminder: Continue posting comments on our #longform Slack channel.

**Week 6: Workshopping Your Mini-Features & Pitching Your Final Project**

We’ll discuss everyone’s mini-features and offer each other constructive criticism (along with
Then we will talk about the ideas you’ve chosen to pursue for your final stories, so you can start working on your pitches for next week.

**Writing:** Schedule Zoom meetings outside of class: we’ll meet in small groups to discuss capstone progress.

**Readings:**
- Adam Penenberg, “The Troll’s Lawyer,” *Wired*
- Brendan Koerner, “It Started as an Online Prank. Then It turned Deadly,” *Wired*
- Chris Jones, “Roger Ebert: the Essential Man,” *Esquire*
- Mina Kimes, “The Unkillable Demon King,” *ESPN the Magazine*

**Week 7: Selecting Your Story and Plotting Your Reporting**

We’ll all pretend to be your editors and go over your pitches, noting their strengths and weaknesses. However, assume that your pitch will be green-lit, and that this is the story that will be your primary focus during the second half of the semester. We will also discuss how to draw up a reporting plan, so you can make the best possible use of your time in the weeks to come. Plan to spend 2-3 weeks reporting your story. (You may end up having to report more as you’re working on the outline and even diving into the first draft; that’s totally normal and fine!)

**Writing:** Report your story. Prepare a one-page update memo for me due by noon ET the day of class.

**Reading:**
- Raffi Khatchadourian, “Azzam the American,” *The New Yorker*
- Lizzie Presser, “When Medical Debt Collectors Decide Who Gets Arrested,” *ProPublica*
- Timothy Burke and Jack Dickey, “Manti Te’o's Dead Girlfriend, The Most Heartbreaking And Inspirational Story Of The College Football Season, Is A Hoax,” *Deadspin*
- Nadya Labi, “Want Your Kid to Disappear?” *Legal Affairs*

**Week 8: Pitch Panel**

Now that you’re deep into the reporting process, it’s time to pitch editors at major magazines. I’ll invite 8 magazine editors from Wired, Vanity Fair, GQ, The New York Times Magazine, and others to listen to your story ideas and offer feedback.

**Writing:** Continue working on your capstone feature story.

**Reading:**
- Wright Thompson, “The Secret History of Tiger Woods,” *Sports Illustrated*
- Elif Batuman, “Japan’s Rent-a-Family Industry, *New Yorker*
Week 9: Editing

“Good writing, is rewriting.” — Mario Puzo.

In-class assignment: You’ll receive a 600-word article that you’ll cut down to 300 words on deadline. Then you’ll trim that 300-word article to 150 words. Along the way we’ll discuss editing strategies so that your prose remains clear, tight and bereft of extraneous words and phrases.

Reading:
- Harry Guinness, “How to Edit Your Own Writing,” New York Times
- Brendan Frazier, “What Does ‘Long-Form Journalism Really Mean?’” Literary Hub

Week 10: The Elements of Structure

Now that you’re deep into the reporting process, we’ll check in with everyone to see how they’re faring. What reporting difficulties are you running into? How are you solving problems on the fly? How can the class put its head together to help you push past obstacles?

Even though we’re still a week away from starting the writing process, it’s not too early to launch into our unit on narrative structure. This might just be the most important thing we discuss this semester: No matter how great your reporting or how silky your prose, your story is doomed unless you can come up with a logical, fluid structure. (To steal and mod a line from William Goldman, “Longform IS structure.”)

Writing: Continue on with your reporting, and once again submit a one-page update memo in advance of the next class.

Reading:
- David Grann, “The Mark of a Masterpiece,” The New Yorker
- David Samuels, “Rock is Dead, Harper’s
- Katherine Laidlaw, “Inside the Mind of a Voyeur,” Toronto Life

Week 11: Outlining, Storyboarding, and Other Ways to Keep Your Eyes on the Prize

Now that you’re done with the bulk of your reporting, it’s time to start working on the guide you’ll use to make the writing process tolerable. We’ll talk about the various solutions employed by top writers, some of which are more visual than others.

Writing: Complete an outline, storyboard, or other organizational document for your final story. We’ll meet in small groups to discuss your outlines in detail.

Reading:
• William Finnegan, “The Unwanted,” *The New Yorker*
• Matthew Power, “Confessions of an American Drone Operator,” *GQ*
• Ariel Levy, “Thanksgiving in Mongolia,” *The New Yorker*

**Week 12: Confronting the Terror of the Blank Page**

**SPECIAL GUEST TBD**

Outline or storyboard in hand, you’re now ready to start putting (figurative) pen to paper. But that is, of course, much easier said than done. We’ll talk about strategies to get you going, and how to get unstuck when you keep rewriting the same three sentences over and over again.

Also, we will have a SPECIAL GUEST come talk to us about the art of longform. Stay tuned…

Please remember: Do not be afraid to reach out and ask for help as you get started on writing. This is tricky even for the best writers in the world; there’s no shame in asking for a little assistance if you find yourself mired in Section One for several days.

**Writing:** Start on your final story. No need for an update memo—just focus on getting into the swing of writing every day, and of never losing heart when the going gets tough.

**Reading:**
- “John McPhee, the Art of Nonfiction 3,” *Paris Review* (interview by Peter Hessler)
- Brian Cathcart, “The Lives of Brian Cathcart,” *Granta*
- Brooke Jarvis, “The Obsessive Search for the Tasmanian Tiger,” *The New Yorker*

**Week 13: Figuring Out Transitions and Powering Through to the End**

**SPECIAL GUEST TBD**

You’re now in the thick of the writing process and you have questions. How do I make segue from one section to the next? What “darlings” should I choose to kill in the name of clarity? How do I end this darn thing in a way that’s not cheesy? We’ll go through all of those thorny problems together.

We’ll also have another special guest drop by to talk about their experiences in the writing game.

**Writing:** Finish the first draft of your final story. Drafts are due at the start of class. We will workshop your draft in class in small groups. This week, I will also meet one-on-one with each student to provide in-depth feedback on your draft so that you can take it to the next level.

**Reading:**
- Sabria Rubin Erdely, “A Rape on Campus,” *Rolling Stone*
- “Rolling Stone and UVA: The Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism Report,” *Rolling Stone*
- Eddie Dean, “Stalking Hinckley,” *Washington City Paper*

**Week 14: Revising and Fact-Checking**
Your rough drafts are done and you’re in the home stretch. We’ll spend this evening talking about revision strategies—how you identify weaknesses in the structure, how you smooth out the prose, and how you tactfully push back against editors when you know in your heart they’re wrong. (It’s always a delicate dance.)

We’ll also talk about the fact-checking process, which will involve analyzing our reading about the wild “A Rape on Campus” affair in *Rolling Stone*. What went wrong there, and what lessons can we learn to spare ourselves from similar catastrophe?

**Writing:** Revise your final stories! They are due at noon Eastern on our last day of class.

**Reading:**

- Rachel Aviv, “Toastmaster,” *The Believer*
- Rachel Aviv, “Wrong Answer,” *The New Yorker*
- Daniel Alarcon, “All Politics is Local,” *Harper’s*
- Book Proposal, *TBD*

**Week 15: Long-Form for the Long-Term**

You’ve completed your first major longform story—congratulations! Now we’ll discuss strategies for getting it published, as well as ways you can parlay this achievement into a long-term career as a narrative nonfiction writer.

We’ll talk a lot of business in this class, such as how to transition into writing books and how to venture into the world of film and television without getting fleeced.

**Exit Interview:** Make a one-on-one appointment to discuss your final story; I will aim to have them all read, annotated, and graded within one week. We’ll also talk about the next steps you want to take in the industry, and what you need to work on to achieve the professional future you desire for yourself.