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 a dozen weeks this summer, 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 4,000-word longform project that we’ll then try to place at a publication you admire. Along the way, we’ll also discuss how you can parlay your newfound expertise into writing books or getting involved in the film/TV world.

The basic organizing principle of this 12-week course will be the lifespan of a longform story. We’ll start by putting our heads together to come up with story concepts, and then in each successive week we’ll 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 at home each week. But this is a practical class, 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.
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 learn how to retrieve 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 learn how to attack 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 dozen weeks to learn a fairly complex craft, so our workload may seem a bit intense at times. We’ll be meeting for approximately two to two-and-a-half hours every Tuesday evening, but please plan to set aside several hours more per week to handle a range of assignments. By far the most important of those will be your final 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. Longform 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 that will 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](https://longform.org/podcast)). Here are a few of my favorites:

Matthew Power: [https://longform.org/posts/longform-podcast-29-matthew-power](https://longform.org/posts/longform-podcast-29-matthew-power)

Course Requirements

The obvious stuff first: Please show up for class, please be on time, and please 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, especially in this time of pervasive dread, and I’m always willing to work with you. But please don’t ghost this class or put in minimal effort, and 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 really important that you get your final story to me on time. I realize that will be easier said than done—writing a longform 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.

**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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**SCHEDULE**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Discussion, Activities, Materials</th>
<th>Assignments</th>
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| 1 May 26 | 1) Introduction  
2) Expectations  
3) 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. | **Writing**  
Prepare a three-paragraph pitch for your 1,200-word mini-feature. Please turn in by noon Eastern on June 2. |
| | | The bulk of the class will be taken up with an introduction to the seven pillars of longform: idea generation, pitching, | **Reading**  
(A reminder that all reading materials will be posted on the class site) |
| | | | Katherine Boo, “After Welfare,” *The New Yorker*  
Alfred Lawrie, “Eating |
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).

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Reading</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 June</td>
<td>Ideas and Pitches</td>
<td>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.</td>
<td>Kelefa Sanneh, “Where’s Earl?” <em>The New Yorker</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>3 June</td>
<td>The Ins and Outs of Reporting:</td>
<td>Now that you’re in the thick of reporting your first story, we’ll be</td>
<td>Glass,” <em>Granta</em></td>
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**Writing**

Begin reporting on your mini-feature, which will be due on June 22nd. Plan to turn in a one-page memo on your progress in advance of next week’s class.

**Reading**

(Don’t forget to offer comments on our #longform Slack channel!)

- Aleksander Hemon, “The Aquarium,” *The New Yorker*
- Dave McKenna, “James Dolan Wants You to Love His Band,” *Deadspin*
Developing Sources, Tracking Down Leads, and Cutting Through the BS
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.

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*

4 June 16
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 MONDAY THE 22nd (i.e. 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*
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<th>Date</th>
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<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>5 June 23</td>
<td>Workshopping Your Mini-Features</td>
<td>We’ll discuss everyone’s mini-features and offer each other constructive criticism (along with encouraging praise). 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.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 June 30</td>
<td>Selecting Your Story and Plotting Your Reporting</td>
<td>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</td>
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### Writing

**Work on your pitches for your final story project. They are due no later than noon Eastern time on June 30th.**

### Reading

- Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Mask of Doom,” *The New Yorker*
- Haruki Murakami, “A Walk to Kobe,” *Granta*
- Mina Kimes, “The Unkillable Demon King,” *ESPN the Magazine*
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!)

for me, due by noon Eastern time on July 7th.

**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*

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<th>7 July 7</th>
<th>The Elements of Structure</th>
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| | 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 | | **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* | |  |
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.”)

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<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>8 July 14</td>
<td>Outlining, Storyboarding, and Other Ways to Keep Your Eyes on the Prize</td>
<td><strong>Writing</strong> Complete an outline, storyboard, or other organizational document for your final story.</td>
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<td><strong>Reading</strong></td>
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<td>William Finnegan, “The Unwanted,” <em>The New Yorker</em></td>
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<td>Matthew Power, “Confessions of an American Drone Operator,” <em>GQ</em></td>
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<td>Ariel Levy, “Thanksgiving in Mongolia,” <em>The New Yorker</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>9 July 21</td>
<td>Confronting the Terror of the Blank Page</td>
<td><strong>Writing</strong> 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.</td>
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<td>SPECIAL GUEST TBD</td>
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<td>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 and over again.</td>
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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.

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<th>Date</th>
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<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
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<tr>
<td>10 July 28</td>
<td>Figuring Out Transitions and Powering Through to the End</td>
<td>“John McPhee, the Art of Nonfiction 3,” <em>Paris Review</em> (interview by Peter Hessler)</td>
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<td>SPECIAL GUEST #2</td>
<td>Brian Cathcart, “The Lives of Brian Cathcart,” <em>Granta</em></td>
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<td>Brooke Jarvis, “The Obsessive Search for the Tasmanian Tiger,” <em>The New Yorker</em></td>
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<td>11 August 4</td>
<td>Revising and Fact-Checking</td>
<td>Sabria Rubin Erdely, “A Rape on Campus,” <em>Rolling Stone</em></td>
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<td>“Rolling Stone and UVA: The Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism Report,” <em>Rolling Stone</em></td>
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<td>Eddie Dean, “Stalking Hinckley,” <em>Washington City Paper</em></td>
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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?

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<tr>
<th>12 August 11</th>
<th>Longform for the Long-Term</th>
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<tr>
<td>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.</td>
<td>Exit Interview</td>
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<td>Make a one-on-one appointment to discuss your final story; I will aim to have them all read, annotated, and graded by August 17th. 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.</td>
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Revise your final stories! They are due at noon Eastern on August 11th, 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 (can be skimmed)