New York University
Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute
SYLLABUS JOUR-UA 201, SECTION 4
THE BEAT (PRINT/ONLINE TRACK): Reporting Neighborhood News
FALL 2020
Professor: Francis Flaherty
Thursday, 10:00 AM - 1:40 PM
Location: Online

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Office hours: By appointment

Course Description
They say all politics is local, and the same can be said of journalism. People are endlessly curious about local events. They are interested not merely in the little stories (The police chief bought snazzy new uniforms and the mayor is furious), but also the local wrinkles on the big stories (All the Covid-19 masks got flooded in the hospital basement; they’re flying in new ones).

The second big story this fall is the election. November 3 will spawn plenty of political stories both large and local.

In this online course, students will serve as the sole correspondent for a particular neighborhood, reporting on a stream of locally based stories in pandemic-safe ways. Back in pre-Covid days, students were matched to one particular neighborhood in Downtown Manhattan -- the Lower East Side, maybe, or SoHo, or Greenwich Village. Students returning to NYC this fall can still cover one of those places, but students residing outside NYC can designate their hometown as their beat. Whether your beat is suburban Montclair, N.J., beachfront Venice, Calif., Mexico City, or New York’s East Village, the principles of local reporting are the same.

In their neighborhood beat, students will monitor local news developments and connect with the local cast of newsmakers and colorful characters. We will learn how to spot good story ideas and how to report them -- where to find solid sources, how to conduct fruitful interviews and how to ferret out elusive facts. Reporting is the raw material with which we weave all our stories; we can’t have a story without it.

The course, taught on Zoom, will also examine the fundamentals of journalism, scrutinize the craft of writing and include one-on-one editing sessions with the professor.

A former columnist and editor at The New York Times, Professor Flaherty has modeled this course after The Times’s City Section, where he served as the Deputy Editor. In that
Times section, each reporter was assigned to one particular neighborhood of New York City. In this course, we will be creating our own “City Section.”

Learning Objectives
In this course, students will:

- Demonstrate awareness of journalism’s core ethical values
- Write clear, accurate and engaging prose in an audience-appropriate manner
- Demonstrate critical thinking, independence, and creativity appropriate to the role of journalism in a democratic society
- Interview subjects, conduct research, and evaluate information
- Help each other
- Have fun

Course Structure
The course will consist of mini-lectures, readings, in-class appraisal of those readings, in-class “craft of writing” exercises, peer review of student drafts, writing and rewriting of reporting assignments, and student in-class presentations. We may have Times reporters and other guest speakers as well. We will study the journalistic arts in roughly the order they pop up in an assignment—starting with the hunt for story ideas, and proceeding to the art of the interview, reporting strategies, article organization, the craft of writing, and the editing and proofreading of drafts.

Readings
The required text is “The Elements of Story: A Field Guide to Writing Nonfiction,” by Francis Flaherty. The book is available at the NYU Bookstore, Bobst Library and on Amazon and other online and brick-and-mortar booksellers.

We will also discuss standout articles, past and present. Writers will include marquee folks like A. J. Liebling, Joseph Mitchell, Pete Hamill, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, Richard Preston, and Kevin Baker, as well as reporters from the Times, the New Yorker and elsewhere. For all these articles we will ask: Is the underlying concept of the article smart? Is the reporting thorough? Is the organization logical and smooth? Is the writing compelling? Always, we’ll analyze with an eye to learning lessons we can apply to our own pieces.

Course Requirements
Students are expected to comb their unique neighborhood beat for story ideas, which means hunting for them on the street, on the phone and online. Then you will report out those ideas fully and fairly (and in pandemic safe ways of course), write them up on time
and revise them based on peer review and professor review. You will also do the assigned readings and be ready to discuss them in class. You must attend class regularly, and participate actively in class discussions. Most important, you must help your fellow classmates with their work – contributing reporting tips, writing advices and suggesting possible sources.

**Grading**

Final grades will be calculated as follows: There will be four beat papers of increasing length, and they will collectively account for 65 percent of the final grade: Paper 1 (500 words) —10%; Paper 2 (600 words) —15%; Paper 3 (750 words) --20%; and Paper 4 (1,100 words)—20%. Class attendance and participation will account for 25 percent. Occasional quizzes on assigned readings will account for the remaining 10 percent. In addition, in some cases improvement during the course may be factored into grades, and, equally important, grades can be lowered for any of the following reasons: lateness to or absence from class, late or undelivered assignments and of course plagiarism, invented sources or other unethical conduct.

**Sept. 3  Local Reporting: An Introduction**

Mini-lecture: Exploring your beat – demographics, geography, history, and other basics. Are residents rich or poor, young or old, white or people of color? What are the big churches, schools, factories? What do people do for fun? Ferreting out news/feature story ideas. Print and web resources. Community boards, block associations, prominent figures, and groups in such fields as the arts, education, business, sports, politics, fashion and other areas. Shoe leather. Freshness as a journalistic value.

- Selection of beats
- Exercise: The Ice Breaker

Homework: Research and visit your neighborhood beat or subject beat; read “The Secret Rooftops of Tribeca” by NYT Reporter John Freeman Gill.

**Sept. 10  The Motor of English**

Mini-lecture: How to make a story move. Building motion into your reporting. The virtue of focused verbs. The two, simultaneous jobs of the writer. Appraisal of assigned reading;

**Exercise:** A Still Life in the Front Yard.
Homework: Read “Bleak House” by NYT reporter Richard Morgan (a Chinatown story); visit and research your beat; write a 200-word paragraph on a familiar place – and make it fresh!; orally prepare Pitch 1 – for Paper 1, a 500-word beat report

Sept. 17


● Homework: Read selections from Pete Hamill’s “Invisible City,” and A.J. Liebling’s “The Jollity Building; write pitch for Paper 1; report and write draft of Paper 1

● Sept. 24  The Interview: The Central Act of Journalism


   Homework: Read Michael Wilson’s “Street Court” (about Greenwich Village) Write final of Paper 1; Write pitch for Paper 2

Oct. 1:


Homework: Read “Bleak House” by Richard Morgan. Write Final of Paper 2

Oct. 8


Homework: Readings: “Ground Zero: Before the Fall,” by NYT reporter Eric Lipton; write Pitch Paper 3; write draft of Paper 3

Oct. 15


Homework: Read “Chicken Vanishes, Heartbreak Ensues” by Elizabeth Giddens; write Final of Paper 3; prepare pitch for Paper 4

Oct. 22


Homework: Read “The Kids of Christopher Street,” by Steven Kurutz; write partial draft of Paper 4

Oct. 29


Homework: Read “An Acre of Blue,” by Jeff Van Dam; “Life on Life Row,” by Douglas Martin; write full draft of Paper 4

Nov. 5

Homework: Read “Almost Famous,” by Dana Kennedy

Nov. 12

Nov. 19
Mini-lecture: A Human Face. TBD

Dec. 3
Mini-lecture: Nonwords Are a Language Too. Video: The Forger

Dec. 10
FINAL CLASS

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.