

New York University
Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute
Syllabus JOUR-UA 204.004
Travel Writing: The World on a MetroCard
Summer 2020
Professor: Seth Kugel

Office hours: Wednesdays, 3-4 p.m. or by appointment

Update: We have no idea what the world will look like in late July, let alone the world of travel writing, but we do know that students taking this course will be joining us online from all around the country and (I hope) the globe. Those in New York City will follow a syllabus fairly similar to the original one, depending on city and state guidelines on movement. Assignments for those anywhere outside the city – and those still sheltering in place – have been tentatively adjusted in the “ASSIGNMENTS” section below, but are subject to change. Changes there and throughout the syllabus are tentative and in italics. -Seth

Course Description

Disclaimer: This course is not about how to write about designer hotel amenities, first-class cabins on trips to Dubai, or the finest restaurants in Paris. It’s about making sense of places and people and packaging your conclusions as content that is both useful to travelers and enlightening to readers whether they are planning to travel or not. *It’s also about what the travel world will look like post-pandemic, and how the ever-increasing ethical considerations of overtourism and climate change will play out after a period of non-travel.*

For the purposes of this course, “writing” should be understood broadly, since the best (and worst) travel content produced these days comes not just in written paragraphs, but in photographs, videos, podcasts and quite often a creative mix of such media. In class, we’ll be looking at everything from the reports from 16th century European explorers to Go-Pro-toting YouTubers, and many guidebooks, first-person essays, online features and Instagram accounts in between.

But though the medium may change, the measure of good travel content has barely budged. Do the creators hook their audiences? Do they entertain and inform? Do they reveal unexpected and delightful details of a place, and put them in historical context? Are they modeling good travel by moving around a city, country or hemisphere in an culturally and environmentally sustainable way? Have they managed to escape the tainting of their content by external commercial, financial, or political interests?

Students sheltering at home will explore (and invent) ways to see the world virtually; those who can safely and legally go out will use their hometown or region as a subject,

focusing where possible on neighborhoods or communities culturally different from the student's. If possible, those in New York will be using the city's extraordinarily diverse population as a proxy for the world as a whole, focusing especially on heavily immigrant neighborhoods that may seem tantalizingly foreign and yet extraordinarily local. (Students will produce essays, guidebook entries, reported pieces, travel videos and social media content with an eye toward publishing their work.)

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
- Interview subjects, conduct research, and evaluate information
- Work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness, and diverse perspectives
- Apply journalistic methods to social media and video formats
- Use technological tools and apply quantitative concepts as appropriate

Course Structure and Assignments

Every class will begin with an *online* discussion of one of the assigned readings (identified below with a double asterisk) for which students should be prepared to critique both in content and style. The rest of the day will be a mix of short lectures, discussions, workshops, and guest speakers. (*Note: class trip cancelled.*)

Assignments will mostly be due on noon of class days, and should be submitted as Microsoft Word attachments (or as YouTube links in the case of video) by email with the subject line "NYU Travel Writing: [Assignment name]."

Please note that the final assignment may involve some expenses. Students should be prepared to spend around \$50 to report their pieces.

Readings and other content

Required Text

Rediscovering Travel: A Guide for the Globally Curious, by Seth Kugel (Liveright, 2019)

This is my book on travel based on my experiences as Frugal Traveler columnist for *The New York Times*. It's now out in paperback and can easily be found for under \$15.

Other assignments are available online (see links below) or will be distributed in class or by email. Further suggested reading includes the list below, made up of the sources of some of those assignments and some other suggested titles.

Books

How to Be a Travel Writer, by Don George with Janine Eberle (Lonely Planet, 2017)
Frommer's EasyGuide to New York City 2020, by Pauline Frommer (Frommer's, 2019)
The Norton Book of Travel, ed. by Paul Fussell (Norton, 1987 – hard to find but worth it)
The Best American Travel Writing anthology (any year)
Flights, by Nobel Prize winner Olga Tokarczuk (Riverhead Books, 2018 edition)

Periodicals

The New York Times and *Washington Post* travel sections
The *Los Angeles Times* food section
Afar
National Geographic Traveler
Condé Nast Traveler
Travel + Leisure

Online content

[The Points Guy](#)

[Be My Travel Muse](#)

[Nomadic Matt](#)

[Matador Network](#)

[Roads and Kingdoms](#)

[Atlas Obscura](#)

YouTube channels

[Chopstick Travel](#)

[Gloria Atanmo](#)

[Bald and Bankrupt](#)

[Kara & Nate](#)

[Oneika the Traveller](#) and on the Travel Channel

Course Requirements

Students should come to class prepared to discuss the day's readings, and prepared critiques for the starred (**) assignments for each class (see class participation, below). They should submit assignments on time, echoing the rhythm of journalistic deadlines, and alert me well in advance on the very exception and totally unavoidable occasion that they need more time. Students should follow department guidelines on plagiarism and follow Associated Press style in their work.

I am open to individual requests to alter the format and length of the assignments below as long as the result reflects the current world of travel content creation.

Grading

Grading will conform to the Journalism Department's policy:

A = publishable as is
B = publishable with light editing
C = publishable with a rewrite
D = major problems with organization, facts, reporting, writing
F = missing key information, containing gross misspellings, plagiarism or libel.

Note: grades will be lowered for assignments that are not within 50 words of the word count.

ASSIGNMENTS

Class participation: 10% of grade

Students should 1) join the class on time; 2) come to class prepared; 3) participate in class, especially in the discussion of class reading assignment. Note that each class session has a *starred* reading below. For that particular reading, students should come prepared with at least one critique of the piece as a whole and identify one passage they either loved or hated.

Essay on travel (750 words): due July 8

10% of grade

An original, compelling, non-sappy take *either* on what travel means to you *or how you think the pandemic will change travel in 2021 and beyond.*

Guidebook entry (200-300 words): due July 13

10% of grade

An engaging, useful, fact-checked summary of *a local attraction, restaurant or shop, either in an immigrant neighborhood or community culturally different from your own, where possible, formatted like an entry to Frommers EasyGuide to New York City 2020.*

Pitch for final project (three paragraphs or so): due July 20

Graded as part of final project

An appealing, specific and smart proposal for your final project and video, written as an email pitch to a travel editor (print or online) or blogger you have never worked for before. *If it will be reported in person, the project should focus on either a specific neighborhood or a theme related to a neighborhood with a significant immigrant population or culturally different from your own, if possible. If it will be reported virtually, it can be about anywhere, but please be specific about the format and why it will appeal to readers/viewers.*

Instagram/photo essay (5-8 images with maximum accompanying text of 1000 total words): due July 27

15% of grade

If local travel is possible, a carefully-curated, sparsely-written, surprising look at a neighborhood or nearby town different from your own, in either Instagram or online newspaper travel section format. If local travel is not possible, creative substitutions are welcome; for example, a humorous photo essay pitching your house as a bed-and-

breakfast for foreign visitors. (What matters here is the quality of images and visually coherent storytelling.)

YouTube video (two to eight minutes): due August 5

15% of grade

A visually rich, sharply edited and smart video take on some aspect of your final project. Can follow the format of a YouTube travel vlog or other online video or TV show.

Reported travel ethics piece (700-900 words): due August 10

15% of grade

A well-reported, highly-relevant, potentially controversial newspaper article or blog entry on a current issue of travel ethics, from overtourism to cultural sustainability to traveler behavior to climate change (or something else).

Final project (1200-1500 words plus sidebar): draft due August 12, final version due August 17

25% of grade

A professional, publishable, first-person travel piece on an immigrant neighborhood of New York City *or your hometown or region, focusing on an immigrant neighborhood or one culturally different from your own, if possible*, with a sidebar with service information *OR an article featuring an innovative effort to travel without leaving home OR an article on the business of travel's return after the pandemic.*

WEEK 1 (July 6/8): What is travel? What is travel writing? What is New York City?

We'll spend the first session talking about the human impulse to travel and the just as human impulse to record and share those travels, from Christopher Columbus to Mark Twain to Mary Kingsley (never heard of her?) to the guy that left that horribly inaccurate TripAdvisor review. *For the second session, we'll go deep into the nuts and bolts of travel reporting – how travel writers and creators get ideas, prepare for trips, seek out sources, conduct interviews and, perhaps most importantly, seek out interesting experiences. We'll discuss good travel writing done during the pandemic, and how it might change travel writing in the future.* We'll also go over the basics of fact-checking and note-taking and discuss whether travel writers need to travel anonymously to be fair.

Guest speaker: Pauline Frommer, co-president, Frommer Media

Readings:

Monday, July 6: What is travel?

- ****Excerpts from Christopher Columbus, Pedro Vas de Caminha and Mary Kingsley (to be distributed via email prior to first class)**

- Excerpts from Pauline Frommer's *Frommer's EasyGuide to New York City 2020* (to be distributed via email prior to first class)
- *Rediscovering Travel*, Chapters 1-2

Essay on travel due July 8, noon

Wednesday, July 8: What is travel writing?

- **"An Elegiac Carnival," by Pico Iyer, from *Falling Off the Map* (packet)
- "[Mother Tongue](#)," by Lucas Loredó, *Oxford-American*
- *Rediscovering Travel*, Chapter 3
- *CURRENT ARTICLES WRITTEN AFTER TRAVEL SHUT DOWN TO BE ADDED*

Guidebook entry due July 13, noon

WEEK 2: Service Writing and the Travel Essay

The second week of class will focus on writing, writing and writing, especially focusing on perhaps the two most common formats of travel writing: the service piece and the first person essay. We'll discuss what makes a service piece successful, and then explore the far more open world of first person writing through books, articles and blogs. How is traveling as a travel writer different from traveling as a regular human being? What makes for an effective physical description of a place? How does one structure a piece to create a narrative arc? How to use interviews and more informal socializing? How can you make a trip sound both appealing and realistic?

Guest speaker: Amy Virshup, travel editor, New York Times

Readings:

Monday, July 13

- **Writing on Rio de Janeiro by Annie Allnut Brasse, Peter Fleming and John White (excerpted from *Great Cities Through Travelers' Eyes*, edited by Peter Furtado)
- Chapter 5, *Rediscovering Travel*
- VIDEO: "[Lucas tries catfish...](#)" Off Menu (LA Times Travel)
- "[Returning to Vieques](#)," by Jan Benzel (NYT Travel section)
- The prior week's New York Times Travel section

Wednesday, July 15:

- **Excerpts from "Revolutionary Ride: On the Road in Search of the Real Iran," by Lois Pryce (packet)
- "[DIY Africa](#)," by Seth Kugel (article and video)
- "[How the Chili Pepper Took Over the World](#)," by Matt Gross, from Airbnb Magazine, available on Medium.

Pitch due July 20, noon

WEEK 3: Pitching, Photography, Social Media

For the first session this week, we'll focus on selling stories. What makes for a good story idea? How do you turn that into a pitch? And what publications out there publish (and pay for) travel stories? We'll brainstorm ways to write creatively about a New York City neighborhood or come up with a themed piece on New York City immigrant communities. For the second session we'll be focusing on both travel photography – since most pictures these days are taken by the writers themselves – and its use on Instagram and other social media platforms.

Guest speaker: Erin Levi, freelance travel writer

Readings:

Monday, July 20

- ****Excerpts from *How to Be a Travel Writer* by Don George with Janine Eberly (Lonely Planet, 2017)**
- **Work from Erin Levi TBA**
- **“[DIY Africa](#),” by Seth Kugel from the New York Times Travel section**

Wednesday, July 22

- ****Instagram accounts: review at least the most recent 10 entries from [Sam Youkilis](#), [The Blonde Abroad](#) and the Washington Post's “[By the Way](#)”.**
- **[52 Places to Go in 2020](#), *The New York Times***

Instagram/photo essay due July 27, noon

WEEK 4: Video content

Anthony Bourdain is the reference for travel video that is visually compelling, deeply reported and artfully told. But he worked with a staff of dozens. These days all it takes is a smartphone and editing software to make a travel video. The result: there are many, many terrible travel videos on YouTube (and elsewhere) these days. Some have millions of views, which is not helping matters. In Monday's session, we'll look at a variety of travel videos made without a crew and look at what makes them good (or terrible). In the second session, we'll talk about the more technical aspects of creating travel content, including, perhaps most importantly, shooting to edit.

Guest speaker: Benjamin Rich (unconfirmed), host of the Bald and Bankrupt YouTube channel

Videos:

Monday, July 27: Travel Videos in 2020

- ****“[Searching for Ganja in Azerbaijan](#),” Bald and Bankrupt YouTube channel.**

- [“Searching for Cachaça in Minas Gerais,”](#) Amigo Gringo (watch with subtitles activated)
- [“Five Things to Expect When Travelling While Black,”](#) Oneika the Traveller
- [“Traveling While Black,”](#) Damon and Jo

Wednesday, July 29: Technical aspects of video

- **[“Mongolian BBQ “Boodog” – CRAZY Nomadic Food in Mongolia,”](#) Chopstick Travel
- [“Brasília: The Film,”](#) Eric Hinojosa

WEEK 5: Travel ethics, sustainability, and the history of travel

This week we’ll take a step back and look two subjects that inform good content (and all too often, don’t inform bad travel writing): ethics and history. In the first session we’ll debate issues ranging from neo-colonialism and “poorism” to when you should take pictures of children to the unholy alliance between travel marketing and travel journalism. We’ll also brainstorm ideas for the ethics assignment. For the second session we’ll look at how modern travel came to be and what that can tell us about why and how people travel today.

Guest speaker (by video): Eric Zuelow, professor of history at the University of New England; author of the *History of Modern Tourism*

Readings:

Monday, August 3: Ethics

- **Watch [“Travel As a Political Act,”](#) by Rick Steves
- Chapters 4 and 8, *Rediscovering Travel*
- [“The Ethics of Travel Photography: Should we take photos of children?”](#) by Clidina

Wednesday, August 5: History

- Excerpts from *A History of Modern Tourism* (Red Globe Press, 2015)

Videos due Wednesday, Aug. 5, at noon

WEEK 6: Final projects

We’ll devote portions of the final two classes to workshopping and sharing the ethics and assignments, videos and final projects, and strategizing about pitching them for publication.

Readings:

Monday, August 10:

- ****The Art of Travel**, by Alain de Botton (Vintage, 2002), Chapter IV: "On Curiosity"

Wednesday, August 12:

- ****Flights**, by Olga Tokarczuk (Riverhead Books, 2018), pp. 52-70

Ethics pieces due Monday, August 10 at noon

Draft final project due August 12 for class

Monday, August 17 Final project due by noon.

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](tel: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.