

New York University
Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute
Syllabus SS1: JOUR-UA 202.001
Writing the Profile: Capturing Character
Summer 2020
Professor: Jen Ortiz

Office hours: immediately following Wednesday classes or
by appointment

Course Description

Profiles come in all shapes and sizes: 5,000-word magazine long forms; 2,500-word celebrity covers; 750-word Q+As; even 150-word one-question Q+As. This course will explore how—and when, and why—to write them all. We will discuss what makes for a compelling profile: from preparing and strategizing for the interview, to story structures and editing. We will dissect a selection of profiles (ranging in type), peer edit, and hear from guest speakers who've written some of your favorite profiles. Oh, and we'll write, a lot.

Learning Objectives

By the end of the course, among other assignments, you will have a short feature profile with your byline on it. (Of course, we'll go over pitching, too.) That means you'll also learn how to:

- 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
- use technological tools and apply quantitative concepts as appropriate
- contact sources and prep for, and conduct, various types of interviews
- research background information
- report and incorporate scenes, color, and detail
- edit, and more importantly, *be edited*
- think critically and brainstorm ideas
- pitch editors
- develop and cultivate voice
- write clear, sharp, and provocative prose

Class Structure

Lectures and discussion, course readings, peer editing, in-class writing exercises, guest speakers...and snacks.

Readings

Required readings are listed below and can mostly be found online (I'll provide printouts for any that aren't). Everyone is expected to read the profiles for the assigned date as they will

inform class discussions. Highlight your favorite lines, strikethrough what you'd cut, write questions that aren't answered in the margins—basically read these stories as though you are the editor of the piece.

Additionally, each student will be assigned a class for which they will provide one or two additional readings based on the topic for that class. (I'll review the topics when I send out assignments so we're all on the same page.) Come to class prepared to talk about your choices and why you selected them.

By the way, the readings below are subject to change. You never know when the Next Great Profile is going to be published. (Don't worry, you'll have plenty of advanced notice.)

Course Requirements

Class participation (as in, doing the readings and talking about them in class, as well as actively participating in peer editing and discussions) and attendance will be part of your final grade—if you miss more than two classes, for whatever reason, you cannot get higher than a B in the class. Everyone is expected to come to class on time and prepared, hand in assignments by the below due dates, do the readings, and fully participate. It's more fun that way.

If you do need to miss a class, I expect an email at least 24 hours beforehand unless there's an emergency. Deadline extensions will be considered on an as needed basis—though *not*, obviously, encouraged—and require just as much notice.

Writing assignments are due, via email, on the dates listed below **by noon**. Send them to jenortiznyc@gmail.com. As you'll see below, both first and final drafts for stories are considered assignments. I will provide feedback on first drafts, as your editor would. Final grades will be a combined assessment of the drafts and your handling of the edit process.

Here's how the final course grade will be calculated—

- Short Q+A (500-750 words): 20%
- One-question Q+A (100-150 words): 15%
- Long Q+A or as-told-to (750-1,000 words): 20%
- Short profile (1,000-2,000 words): 25%
- Class participation and readings: 20%

Note: **all** work—whether a rough draft, final copy, or just an email—should be checked for grammar and spelling before hitting send.

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.

Okay, here's what we're doing:

Wednesday, May 27

Introductions and course overview, followed by group discussion: what exactly is a profile, and what makes for a successful one? We'll use this definition as our standard for pitches and assignments throughout the course.

In-class writing assignment:

- It's a surprise!

In-class readings:

- ["Bradley Cooper Is Not Really Into This Profile,"](#) by Taffy Brodesser-Akner for *The New York Times*
- ["The Zombie Campaign,"](#) by Olivia Nuzzi for *New York Magazine*

We'll also review the basics of interviewing and reporting, including the tools you need, how to work with an editor, and more. Oh, and what to do if you must do a write-around.

Monday, June 1

Due today:

- Select two (short!) Q+As—one you love and one you, um, don't—and share the links with me via email. Come to class prepared to talk about your selections.
- *Assigned readings:*
 - ["By day, she's the mayor's receptionist. By night, she's a pro wrestling goddess,"](#) by Vaughn Johnson for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*
 - ["Keano Is N.Y.'s Most Famous and Mysterious Subway Psychic. I Found Her,"](#) by Sam Kestenbaum for *The New York Times*
 - ["In Conversation: Quincy Jones,"](#) by David Marchese for *New York Magazine*
 - ["In Conversation: Anjelica Huston,"](#) by Andrew Goldman for *New York Magazine*
 - TK short (very short!) Q+As from previous print issues of *GQ* and *Marie Claire*.
 - TK student-selected reading.

In-class writing assignment:

- Pair up and interview each other to craft your own Q+A.

We'll discuss assigned readings and selected Q+As, as well as strategies for writing a compelling Q+A. Then we'll try our hand at making our own and come back together to talk about the experience from the POV of both the interviewer and the subject. If we have time afterwards, we'll do a short follow-up interview session.

Also on the agenda: how to select and approach an interview subject, basics for interviewing, and more.

Wednesday, June 3

Due today:

- First draft of in-class Q+A assignment (500-750 words).
- Pitches for 2-3 interview subjects for your second Q+A/as-told-to and short profile assignments (you have the option of using the same subject for each—in which case you'd expand on the material from your Q+A—or different subjects for the two pieces). Email these to me—can be short 2-3 sentence descriptions of each person and why you want to write about them—and come prepared to pitch in class. **Note: these should be subjects you will have access to—people for whom you already have or can find contact info for, and who'd likely have the availability (and willingness) necessary to participate. We'll discuss more beforehand.**
- *Assigned readings:*
 - [“How Mike Drucker, Comedy Writer, Spends His Sundays,”](#) by Nancy A. Ruhling for *The New York Times*
 - [“How Rawia Bishara, Chef and Restaurateur, Spends Her Sundays”](#) by Shivani Vora for *The New York Times*
 - [“Aparna Nancherla’s Comedy Diary: ‘Inspiration Is Like the Urge to Pee,’”](#) by Burt Helm for *The New York Times*
 - [“Deb Perelman’s Work Diary: The ‘Smitten Kitchen’ Is Open \(Even When the Cook Is Sick\),”](#) by Sapna Maheshwari for *The New York Times*
 - [“The Witness,”](#) by Pamela Colloff for *Texas Monthly*
 - TK student-selected reading.

In-class writing assignment:

- Peer-editing and revisions of in-class Q+As
- Draft a one-question Q+A from your original in-class Q+A. We will be reviewing these as a group.

We'll discuss your in-class Q+As, as well as as-told-to-style profiles (see: the *NYT*'s “Sunday Routine” column), and the not-so-secret secret to a good one: follow-up Qs. Don't worry we'll practice. (Spoiler: we're gonna do a role-playing exercise. *cue dramatic music*) Additionally, we'll talk about the importance of display copy, editorializing/context, and self-editing in these sorts of interviews. We'll also discuss your pitches—you should come away with *at least* two approved subjects.

Monday, June 8

Due today:

- *Revised* final draft of in-class Q+A assignment. Note: this copy should include a hed/dek and short intro.
- Come to class prepared to give us a status update on your interview subject(s). (You should be in touch with them at this point and have time scheduled to chat/already completed your first interview or know if you should move on. If the latter, please come with some backup plan ideas.)
- *Assigned readings:*

- [“The mystery of Tucker Carlson,”](#) by Lyz Lenz for *Columbia Journalism Review*
- [“Miles Teller Is Young, Talented, and Doesn't Give a Rat's Ass What You Think,”](#) by Anna Peele for *Esquire*
- [“The Look Book Goes to Zitomer,”](#) by Katie Schneider and Jane Drinkard for *New York Magazine*
- TK student-selected reading.

We'll discuss how to prepare for interviews, strategies for both phoners and in-person interviews, how to compile back-up for research, and more. We'll also review strategies for connecting with difficult subjects. (Spoiler: we're gonna do *another* role playing exercise. *cue screams*) You'll share your experiences from your first profile interview and discuss any learnings, surprises, and challenges. We'll also hear from a guest speaker. (Name TK.)

Wednesday, June 10

Due today:

- One-question Q+A with display copy (100-150 words).
- *Assigned readings:*
 - [“A Snitch's Dilemma,”](#) by Ted Conover for *The New York Times Magazine*
 - [“Regular, Degular, Shmegular Girl From the Bronx,”](#) by Allison P. Davis for *New York Magazine*
 - [“Covering the Cops,”](#) by Calvin Trillin for *The New Yorker*
 - [“Madonna's Spring Awakening,”](#) by Roxane Gay for *Harper's Bazaar*
 - TK student-selected reading.

In-class writing assignment:

- Let's go outside and write what you see—yes, really.

We'll discuss secondaries and scenes—fun fact: without them, you don't have a profile. We'll review their role in a profile and strategies for reporting and incorporating them during your process.

Monday, June 15

Due today:

- First draft of long Q+A (750-1,000 words; in traditional Q+A format or as-told-to).
- *Assigned readings:*
 - [“Mazie,”](#) by Joseph Mitchell for *The New Yorker*
 - [“Gloria Allred's Crusade,”](#) by Jia Tolentino for *The New Yorker*
 - TK student-selected reading.

In-class writing assignment:

- In pairs, students will read an assigned profile and highlight and discuss the ledes and nut grafs in the story—and then collectively rewrite history.

We'll discuss the most essential element of good profile writing: ledes and nut grafs. (Oh, and they're the hardest part, too. Fun!) We will dissect the ones in the assigned readings and look at other stories in-class to review the good and the bad, and rewrite the in-between. We'll also workshop long Q+A drafts and hear from a guest speaker. (Name TK.)

Wednesday, June 17

Due today:

- Come prepared to give a status update on your final profile, as well as secondaries and scenes for the piece. We'll discuss and provide feedback as a group.
- *Assigned readings:*
 - [“How Goop’s Haters Made Gwyneth Paltrow’s Company Worth \\$250 Million,”](#) by Taffy Brodesser-Akner for *The New York Times Magazine*
 - [“Taffy Brodesser-Akner Really, Really, Really Wanted to Write This Profile,”](#) by Jen Ortiz for *Cosmopolitan*
 - [“The Full Tatum,”](#) by Jessica Pressler for *GQ*
 - TK student-selected reading.

We'll discuss the role of the writer *in* the profile: when to you insert yourself, when to speak for the reader, when to take yourself out, and more. We'll continue workshopping the long Q+As and discuss plans for final profiles. We'll also hear from a guest speaker. (Name TK.)

Monday, June 22

Due today:

- Final draft of long Q+A. Please include a hed/dek.
- *Assigned readings:*
 - [“The Encyclopedia of Matt Damon,”](#) by The Editors of *GQ* for *GQ*
 - [“50 Cent Is My Life Coach,”](#) by Zach Baron for *GQ*
 - TK student-selected reading.

We'll discuss different story structures a profile can have and when it makes sense to stray from the traditional form. Plus, strategies on how to do it. We'll also hear from a guest speaker. (Name TK.)

In-class writing assignment:

- Don't panic, but—let's rethink your profile entirely! Each student will be assigned another's long Q+A/short profile (either the assignment turned in earlier that day or what you know about the student's short profile subject) and come up with another story structure it could have. What would it look like? What other interviews would be included? What would you cut? Etc.

Wednesday, June 24

Due today:

- First draft of short profile(1,000-2,000 words).
- *Assigned readings:*
 - [“Is It Possible to Stop a Mass Shooting Before It Happens?”](#) by Andrea Stanley for *Cosmopolitan*
 - [“What Bullets Do to Bodies,”](#) by Jason Fagone for *Highline*
 - [“Colin Kaepernick Has a Job,”](#) by Rembert Browne for *Bleacher Report*
 - TK student-selected reading.

We'll discuss how a profile can tell a story bigger than that of the subject. Also: We'll talk all things pitching! How, where, and when to do it—and brainstorm potential outlets to pitch

your profiles. We'll also discuss and workshop the first draft of your short profile. And we'll hear from a guest speaker. (Name TK.)

Monday, June 29

Due today:

- What is one element of your final draft that you're struggling with, or would love outside insight on? Email me your answer—and any relevant copy, context, you name it—by noon, and we'll discuss during the day's in-class writing assignment.
- *Assigned readings:*
 - [“My President Was Black,”](#) by Ta-Nehisi Coates for *The Atlantic*
 - [“Roger Ebert: The Essential Man,”](#) by Chris Jones for *Esquire*
 - TK student-selected reading.

In-class writing assignment:

- Each student will be assigned a draft/dilemma, per the day's assignment, to review and provide feedback. We'll come together as a group afterwards to discuss.

We'll continue workshopping your profiles and discuss the writing process, how to self-edit, methods for eliminating writer's block, how to communicate with your editor (when to push back and when to give in), and more. Bonus: lightning round! Let's discuss any questions about media (the work, the industry, the future) you still have and find answers. Plus, we'll hear from a guest speaker. (Name TK.)

Wednesday, July 1

Due today:

- Final draft of short profile. Please include a hed/dek.
- *Assigned readings:*
 - [“Frank Sinatra Has a Cold,”](#) by Gay Talese for *Esquire*

We'll discuss our final profiles, and review one of the most high-profile profiles of all-time. Plus, something fun and celebratory TK!