

New York University
Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute
Profile Writing: Capturing the Human Experience
Summer 2021

Professor: Jen Ortiz

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virtual office hours: immediately following Wednesday classes or by appointment

Course Description

Think of profiles as the juiciest form of journalism. Profiles—5,000-word magazine long forms; 2,500-word celebrity covers; 750-word Q+As; even 150-word one-question Q+As—are an opportunity to step inside someone’s life (their world, really) and experience their ambitions, fears, joys, tragedies, guilty pleasures and more. At the end, if you’re lucky, you leave the page with an understanding of not just the subject, but the world and how you experience it. See? *Juicy*. This course will examine 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, sharpen our reporting skills, 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 remotely
- research background information
- remotely report (it’s possible, promise!) 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 virtual class cameos from my objectively adorable dogs, Scrapple and Gus. Class discussions (including those with guest speakers) and office hours will take place virtually. I’ll moderate discussions to ensure everyone has opportunities to participate, and avoid speaking over each other and *screams* awkward silences. Peer editing and in-class group assignments will also happen virtually. I will drop into individuals sessions to observe and provide feedback, then we will come back together as a class to discuss learnings.

Readings

Required readings are listed below and can mostly be found online (I'll provide PDFs 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.) Sign on to class prepared to talk about your choices and why you selected them.

By the way, the readings below are subject to change or move around. 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 on Zoom with your camera on, 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, you cannot get higher than a B in the class. Everyone is expected to sign on 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.

In addition to the dates below, because our session kicks off a little late due to the holiday, we will meet for another session. Date is TBD; we'll schedule for a day and time that works for most, if not all, of us.

Grading

Assignments are due, via email, on the dates listed below **by noon**. Send them to jo838@nyu.edu. 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): 10%
- As-told-to (750-1,000 words): 25%
- 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.

Okay, here's what we're doing:

Wednesday, July 7

Introductions and course overview. 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!

Assigned readings:

- ["Bradley Cooper Is Not Really Into This Profile,"](#) by Taffy Brodesser-Akner for *The New York Times*
- ["The Joy and Agony of Being @deuxmoi, Instagram's Accidental Gossip Queen,"](#) by Maureen O'Connor for *Vanity Fair*

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, July 12

Due today:

- Select two (short!) Q+As—one you love and one you, um, don't—and share the links with me via email before class by noon. 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 use Zoom breakout rooms.)

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, July 14

Due today:

- First draft of in-class Q+A assignment (500-750 words).
- Pitches for 2-3 interview subjects for your 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 as-told-to—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 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*
 - [“I Never Thought of Cecilia Chiang as an Icon. She Was Just My Best Friend,”](#) by Belinda Leong, as told to Elyse Inamine for *Bon Appetit*
 - [“Being a Black Chef in a White-Led Restaurant Industry Isn’t Easy—But I’m Not Giving Up,”](#) by Deborah Vantrece, as told to Hilary Cadigan for *Bon Appetit*
 - 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, 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, July 19

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*
- [“The Witness,”](#) by Pamela Colloff for *Texas Monthly*
- 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, July 21

Due today:

- One-question Q+A with display copy (100-150 words).
- *Assigned readings:*
 - [“EveryWoman.com,”](#) by Joan Didion for *The New Yorker*
 - [“My Wine Bills Have Gone Down.' How Joan Didion Is Weathering the Pandemic,”](#) by Lucy Feldman for *Time*
 - [“A Snitch's Dilemma,”](#) by Ted Conover for *The New York Times Magazine*
 - [“Pamela Anderson's Garden of Eden,”](#) by Caity Weaver for *The New York Times*
 - TK student-selected reading.

In-class writing assignment:

- Write what you see—you'll find out what it is you're looking at in class.

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, July 26

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*
 - [“Covering the Cops,”](#) by Calvin Trillin for *The New Yorker*
 - [“Nora Knows What to Do,”](#) by Ariel Levy 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, July 28

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 workshoping the long Q+As and discuss plans for final profiles. We'll also hear from a guest speaker. (Name TK.)

Monday, August 2

Due today:

- Final draft of as-told-to. Please include a hed/dek.
- *Assigned readings:*
 - [“Reintroducing Sonia Sotomayor,”](#) by Irin Carmon for *New York Magazine*
 - [“Paris Hilton Is the Hardest-Working Woman in the Game,”](#) by Irin Carmon for *Marie Claire*
 - [“50 Cent Is My Life Coach,”](#) by Zach Baron for *GQ*
 - [“Robert Pattinson: A Dispatch From Isolation,”](#) 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 as-told-to/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, August 4

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*

- [“The Many Lives of Steven Yuen,”](#) Jay Caspian Kang by for *The New York Times*
- 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, August 9

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*
 - [“Regular, Degular, Shmegular Girl From the Bronx,”](#) by Allison P. Davis for *New York Magazine*
 - [“Joey King Knows Hollywood Wasn’t Made for Young Women to Thrive,”](#) by Emma Baty for *Cosmopolitan*
 - 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, August 11

Due today:

- Final draft of short profile. Please include a hed/dek.
- *Assigned readings:*
 - [“Roger Ebert: The Essential Man,”](#) by Chris Jones for *Esquire*
 - [“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!