

**New York University**  
Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute  
Course: SS1: JOUR-UA 201

**THE BEAT: REPORTING YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD'S NEWS  
SUMMER 2021**

Professor Francis Flaherty  
Tu, Th, 11:00 A.M. – 3:00 P.M. (EST)  
May 25 – July 1

To contact professor: [FJF1@nyu.edu](mailto:FJF1@nyu.edu) // Office hours: By appointment

## **SYLLABUS**

### **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).

In this six-week online course, students will serve as correspondents for their hometown, reporting on a stream of local stories in pandemic-safe ways. Home may be anywhere -- suburban Montclair, N.J., beachfront Venice, Calif., the hip East Village in New York City, or the Trastevere quarter of Rome.

Professor Flaherty, a former columnist and editor at The New York Times, has modeled this course after The Times's City Section, for which he was the Deputy Editor. In that section, Times reporters served as correspondents for particular New York City neighborhoods; their "beat" might be Greenwich Village, or Williamsburg, or Tribeca. This course will be taught on Zoom, however, so that each student will be the unique correspondent for wherever they live. In that role, they will write profiles of local celebrities, uncover feature stories, explore trends, and chronicle local angles on major developments.

The course will also examine the fundamentals of journalism, hone students' reporting skills, scrutinize the craft of writing and include one-on-one editing sessions with Professor Flaherty.

### **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 lectures, readings, writing and rewriting of stories, peer review, and student presentations. Most important, students will report.

### **Readings**

The required text is “The Elements of Story: A Field Guide to Writing Nonfiction,” by Francis Flaherty (Harper). It is available on Amazon, many bookstores and elsewhere, in hardcover, softcover and e-book.

We will also analyze standout articles by journalists from the Times, The New Yorker, Vanity Fair, Slate, Salon, The L.A. Times, Atlantic Monthly, The Washington Post and elsewhere. We will critique these articles along the following lines: Is the underlying concept smart? Is the reporting thorough? Is the structure solid? Is the writing compelling? Is the approach fair and evenhanded? Then we’ll apply these insight to our own pieces.

### **Course Requirements**

Students will scout out smart story ideas about their hometowns, develop sources for those stories, report them out, and write them up. They will write several stories during this nine-week course in various genres. In addition, students will do the assigned readings, attend our Zoom class regularly, participate actively in those classes, and help other students develop story ideas and write clear and well-ordered stories.

### **Grading**

Final grades will be calculated as follows:

There will be four papers that will collectively account for 70% of the final grade: Paper 1 (500 words) —10%; Paper 2 (600 words) —15%; Paper 3 (900 words) --15%; and Paper 4 (1,100 words)—30%. Class attendance and participation are 20%. Occasional quizzes on assigned readings will account for 10%. Improvement during the course may be factored into grades, which can be lowered for lateness to or absence from class, late or undelivered assignments and plagiarism or other ethical issues.

### **Class Schedule**

**5/25 Hometown Journalism: An Introduction:** Finding and evaluating ideas for local stories: Print and Web resources. Community boards, block associations, city councils and other primary sources. Freshness as a journalistic value. “Local” doesn’t mean “little.” How can you tell a 500-word idea from a 1,000-word idea? Has someone already done this story? If so, do we care?

- Hometown beats – The neighborhoods we live in and their characteristics: Who lives there, chief industries, local institutions (churches, schools, museums), geography (mountains, beaches, downtowns, shopping malls, farmland), history (famous residents, historical monuments, noteworthy events).
- Exercise: The Ice Breaker

Homework

\* Research your hometown – Recent news stories, local politics, current “hot button” issues, future worries and aspirations.

\*Readings: “A Long Jump to Manhood in the Bronx,” by Sam Dolnick (New York Times) (teenage boys dive from a cliff into the Hudson in a male rite of passage).

**5/27 The Motor of English:** 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

- Research your beat by phone, Skype, Zoom, Google, etc.
- Write a 200-word paragraph on a familiar place – and make it fresh!
- Prepare Pitch 1 for Paper 1
- Reading: “When Surfing the Rockaways, It’s Workout or Wipe Out,” by Lisa Collins (NYT);

**6/1 A Typology of Story Ideas:** Slow News, Contrarianism, Symbolic Stories, The Virtues of Idleness. Look Inward, Angel. The Peg. The Unlit Corner. The Cobbler. Man Bites Dog, etc.

- Peer Review: 200-word “familiar” scene
- Roundtable appraisal: Pitches for Paper 1
- Class Presentations: The Basics of the Beat
- Editor of the Day 1

- Homework
- Reading: “The Extremist,” by Michael Specter (New Yorker)

- Report and write draft of Paper 1

**6/3 The Art of the Interview:** An interview is a conversation. Pick your interviewee carefully. A good interview happens before the interview. Be open and honest and professional. The two questions you should always ask.

- Peer Review: Paper 1 Draft
- Guest Speaker: TBA
- Editor of the Day 2
- Class discussion: Being a good listener is the most important trait of the journalist

#### Homework

- Reading: “What About George?” by Saki Knafo (NYTimes) and “One Day of Anarchy at Coney Island,” by Fan Chen (unpublished student paper)
- Submit Final of Paper 1 before class on June 9
- Pitch for Paper 2 (Summer ritual or other event)
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- **6/8 A Human Face:** The difficulty of putting a human face on your story. The difficulty of reporting emotions. Talking heads vs. real people. The journalistic importance of empathy.

- Exercise: The Body Language Dictionary
- Class Roundtable: Evaluating pitches for Paper 2
- Exercise: Conveying Emotions In a Striking Way
- Editor of the Day 3

#### Homework

- Report and write draft of Paper 2
- Read “The Blind Man Who Taught Himself to See” by Michael Finkel (Men’s Journal)

- **6/10 The Devil Is in the Details:** Spelling, grammar, punctuation: These are all admittedly little things, but they can have an outsize impact on readers’ respect for a piece of writing. How to handle these issues well, and efficiently.

- Peer Review: Draft of Paper 2
- Class roundtable: Reporting and writing problems

- Exercise: The Grammarian
- Editor of the Day 4

#### Homework

- Write final of Paper 2 by 6/16
- Read “What About George?” (NY Times)
- Prepare pitch for Paper 3

**6/15 The Theme: Like the Trunk of a Tree** A subject is not a story. The theme is not the “truth.” Be loyal to your theme – but not too loyal. The theme is not the only part of a story, but it is the biggest and the most central.

- \* Exercise: A Packet of Pitches – You Be the Editor
- \* Roundtable: Evaluating Paper 3 Pitches
- \* Editor of the Day 5

#### Homework

- Reading: “Bleak House,” by Richard Morgan (NYTimes)
- Report and write draft of Paper 3
- Prepare pitch for Paper 4

**6/17 Pruning: Every Word You Write, the Reader Must Read.** Trimming down your prose. The concept of the wasted word. A half dozen ways to say things shorter. The three-step process of shortening a story.

- \* Peer Review: Draft of Paper 3
- \* Editor of the Day 6
- \* Exercise: Pruning an Overgrown Garden
- \* Roundtable: Evaluate pitches for Paper 4
- \* Guest Speaker: TBA

#### Homework

- \* Report on Paper 4
- \* Submit final of Paper 3 before class on 6/23
- \* Reading: “Mountains of Pi,” by Richard Preston (The New Yorker)

**6/22 The Components of an Article:** Ledes, nut grafs, context grafs, billboard grafs, transitions, kickers: How the fundamentals work, and some pitfalls to avoid.

**The Interactive Writer:** Reading is unavoidably a largely passive activity; the reader has to take what the writer gives him. But there are ways to give the reader an active role, and the reader will appreciate writers who deploy them.

- Exercise: Show Don’t Tell: Chloe Is the Most Organized Person I Know
- Editor of the Day 7
- Exercise: The Hunt for the Lede
- Peer Review: Draft of Paper 2

## Homework

- \* Continue reporting on Paper 4
- \* Read selections from The Cut (New York magazine)

**6/24 Outline I:** Simplicity Is the Good News. The Five Kinds of Outlines. The Outline as Reporting Aid. Outlines and Transitions

- \* Class roundtable: Paper 4 pitches
- \* Editor of the Day 8
- \* Exercise: Reporter at the Video

## Homework

Write draft of Paper 4

Reading: “Stranger in the Woods: The Last True Hermit” (Men’s Journal)

**6/29 Outline II:** One Subject, Many Stories. The Perils of the Planless Writer. Sidebars, Charts and Other Organizing Tools. Numbering Your Notes.

**The Art of Quotes, and Their Nuts and Bolts:** Direct quotations are powerful: for readers, they are as if another person has walked onto the page. But there are times when direct quotations don’t work, and times when they are invaluable. How to sort those circumstances out, and use the proper placement and punctuation while you are at it.

- Editor of the Day 10
- Peer Review: Paper 4 draft

## Homework

- Write final of Paper 4
- Reading: “A Son of Football Calls His Mother,” by Dan Barry (NYTimes)

- **7/1 The Artful Writer: Saying It Without Saying It:** A major writerly task is to express ideas and scenes in a riveting, memorable way. An exploration of three techniques a writer can use to grab the reader’s attention.
- Editor of the Day 11
- Workshop: Final Reporting and Writing Issues with Paper 4

## 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](mailto:mosescsd@nyu.edu). Information about the Moses Center can be found at [www.nyu.edu/csd](http://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.