

New York University  
Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute  
Syllabus JOUR-UA 201.001  
Writing the Thinkpiece  
Summer 2020  
Professor: Mathew Rodriguez  
To contact professor: mkr278@nyu.edu  
Office hours: by appointment

## Course Description

Without fail, behind a huge cultural event – the Oscars, a Beyonce album drop, a celebrity faux pas – comes a deluge of think pieces. To craft an effective think piece, a writer must be able to draw from their own experiences, research their opinions, offer confident analysis and weave these elements together into a coherent narrative.

The goal of a think piece is not to win an argument. Rather, it's successful when it helps the reader understand why using certain GIFs might perpetuate racist stereotypes, why it's okay to take a break from casual dating or why it matters when you've decided to dress more visibly queer.

In this class, we'll work to define a think piece, examine the 24/7 news cycle and cultural calendar for story ideas, hone our voices and write and rewrite. We'll also read some of today's most well-known writers like Roxane Gay, Lindy West and Rebecca Solnit. Students should leave the class with several pieces of polished, publishable work.

## Learning Objectives

In this course, students will:

- Discern what constitutes a “thinkpiece”
- Learn the craft behind writing a thinkpiece and be able to identify tools to best suit your writing
- Develop an understanding of the news cycle and how to work off of it
- Learn research techniques that will make their writing more robust
- Analyze a number of works from the genre to be able to make any piece of writing a lesson in craft
- Write and rewrite works to promote the importance of critiquing one's own work
- 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
- Work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness, and diverse perspectives

## Course Structure

Each class will consist of a guided journey in close-reading texts. We will dissect each piece by structure and determine how well the author made their points. Come prepared to class each

week with a print out of each reading, as we will want to work with paper in this class. Also, please bring a notebook.

### Readings

You will not have to purchase any books for this class. All our texts are available online, either through a hyperlink on the syllabus, a PDF or by Googling. (I've included all the relevant information for each piece, including author, title, publication date and publication title in order to find on Google.)

Please come to class each session ready to dissect each text's structure.

Aside from outlined readings, some classes will feature recent thinkpieces currently circulating the zeitgeist to serve as examples of recent responses to the news cycle.

### Course Requirements

Every student is expected to participate in the class. Participations means active engagement with the ideas presented in class. In class, I will usually wait for students to volunteer to speak, but sometimes will call on you. If you don't wish to answer when called on, you have the option to pass.

Every student will submit 6 written assignments: 1) a thinkpiece critique of 800 words, 2) three 800 to 1000-word thinkpieces, 3) a revision of one of the three thinkpieces and, 4) a substantial final paper that is 1200-1400 words will be 25% of your final grade.

### Grading

Final grades will be calculated as follows:

Thinkpiece critique Due TK, 10% of final grade

Thinkpiece #1 Due 7/20, 10% of final grade

We will discuss potential topics for your first thinkpiece as early as the first class. You'll be expected to start watching the news cycle, if you don't already, and respond to an item in the news – politics, pop culture, etc, -- in this and subsequent thinkpieces. Your 3 thinkpiece assignments should be about 800 words each.

Thinkpiece #2 Due 7/27, 10% of final grade

Thinkpiece #3 Due 8/3, 10% of final grade

Thinkpiece revision due 8/5, 20% of final grade

You will be expected to revise one of your first two thinkpieces. You will be graded on how the revision improves the overall clarity and research of your first piece.

Final thinkpiece due 8/12, 25% of final grade

Each thinkpiece you wrote before was about 800 words. For the final paper, you're allowed 1200-1400 words to argue your point.

Class participation/preparedness, 15% of final grade

You will be expected to come to class having read all the assignments on the syllabus for that day and ready to discuss them at length, including each piece's contents, narrative flow and structure.

All assignments are graded on this rubric:

Nutgraf/Thesis — 10 points

Argument/Analysis — 25 points

Research/data — 15 points

Structure/organization — 25 points

Writing style/voice — 15 points

Grammar/ sentence structure — 10 points

#### 7/7 **What Is a Thinkpiece?**

- Philip Lopate, "Introduction", from *Art of the Personal Essay*, January 15, 1995, to be made available as a PDF
- David Haglud, "Why Think Piece Is Pejorative," *Slate*, May 7, 2014
- Dave Schilling, "How to Write a Think Piece," *Vice*, December 22, 2013
- Richard S. Cohen, "The Think Piece: A Guide"
- Renina Jarmon, "Does Period Fiction Have to Be Racially Accurate?" *Zora*, January 14, 2021 (please let me know if you can't access it, I'll email you a PDF)

#### 7/12 **The Aspects of a Think Piece**

- Philip Lopate, "Introduction", from *Art of the Personal Essay*, January 15, 1995, to be made available as a PDF
- Zak Cheney-Rice, "I Want a Divided America," *Mic*, October 24, 2016
- Robert Vazquez-Pacheco, "(No Longer) Sleeping With the Enemy," *OutWeek*, March 20, 1991 (page 24 in PDF)

#### 7/14 **Identifying an Issue and Breaking Down Structure -- Critique due!**

- Lauren Michele Jackson, "We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs," *Teen Vogue*, August 2, 2017
- Rebecca Solnit, "Men Explain Things to Me," *Guernica*, August 20, 2012
- Steven Thrasher, "The Real Mud on The Golden Girls," *Vulture*, July 2, 2020
- Anne Lamott, "Shitty First Drafts"
- Research exercise

#### 7/19 **The News Cycle – First thinkpiece due!**

- Lindy West, “Yes, This is a Witch Hunt. I’m a Witch and I’m Hunting You,” New York Times, October 17, 2017
- Lauren Duca, “Donald Trump Is Gaslighting America,” Teen Vogue, December 10, 2016
- Jacob Bacharach, “Why Pete Buttigieg is Bad for Gays,” Outline, April 8, 2019
- Workshop

#### 7/21 **Cultural Critique**

- Saida Grundy, “The False Promise of Anti-Racism Books,” The Atlantic, July 21, 2020
- Alana Massey, “Against Chill,” Matter, April 1, 2015
- John Sherman, “Gay Male Sex in Television and Film Has a Lube Problem,” BuzzFeed, June 4, 2015
- Workshop

#### 7/26 **Cultural Critique Part 2** – Second thinkpiece due!

- Roxane Gay, “Girls Girls Girls,” Rumpus, May 3 2012
- Michael Blackmon, “The Cultural Appropriation Convo Around Ariana Grande Is Too Simplistic,” BuzzFeed, February 15, 2019
- Ang Tziallas, “Grindr’s Cruel Optimism,” *Slate*, August 31, 2020
- Workshop

#### 7/28 **One on Ones**

- This class will be devoted to one-on-one meetings with each student to discuss your final paper. Class will still meet, but during the class activities, I will pull students out one by one for the one-one-one.
- Research exercise
- Francine Prose, *Reading Like a Writer*
- Workshop

#### 8/2 **Point of View -- Third thinkpiece due!**

- Hazel Cills, “[Megan Thee Stallion and the Limits of the Music Industry’s Compassion](#),” *The Muse*, July 29, 2020
- A. Rochaun Meadows-Fernandez, “[Violence Against Megan Thee Stallion And Others Show Black Women Don’t Get the Safety They Deserve](#),” *Teen Vogue*, July 29, 2020
- Workshop

#### 8/4 **The Personal Is Political**

- John Paul Brammer, “Why I’ve Decided to Start Dressing More Femininely,” BuzzFeed, July 27, 2016
- Crystanthemum Tran, “When Remembering Stonewall, We Need to Listen to Those Who Were There,” *them.*, June 11, 2018
- Workshop

## 8/9 Defending Your Thinkpiece – Revision due!

- Art Tavana, "[Sky Ferreira's Sex Appeal Is What Pop Music Needs Right Now.](#)" LA Weekly, June 17, 2016
- Andy Hermann, "[About that Sky Ferreira Piece: It Crossed the Line and We're Sorry.](#)" LA Weekly, June 18, 2016
- Karen Brill, "'Sky Ferreira Talks Sexism in Light of Controversial Article: 'I'm Not a Think Piece. I'm Not a F\*cking Example,'" Vulture, June 21, 2016
- Workshop thinkpiece #3

## 8/11 Writing about Writing and Pitching – Final assignment due!

- Clarkisha Kent, "There Is Such a Thing as Too 'Woke': A Rebuttal to that Ariana Grande Thinkpiece," INTO, December 4, 2018
- Soraya Robertrs, "The Personal Essay Isn't Dead. It's Just No Longer White," The Walrus, September 20, 2017
- Tim Herrera, "[How to successfully pitch The New York Times \(or, well, anyone else\).](#)" Niemens Lab, October 22, 2018
- Garance Franke-Ruta, "[How \(Not\) To Pitch.](#)" The Atlantic, August 30, 2013

### 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](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.