

City Streets: The Art of Observation

New York University Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute

Instructor: Anna Kodé

Course Meetings and Details

Summer session

June 2025 – in-person meetings on Mondays and Thursdays, 5:30-8:30 p.m.

Course meeting dates: June 2, 5, 9, 12, 16, (skip 19), 23, 26, and 30

2 credits

To contact professor: anna.p.kode@gmail.com

Office hours: after class and by appointment in-person or virtually

Course Description

In New York, much of life takes place in the public sphere of the city's streets, sidewalks and subways. In mere moments, a block can shift from a protest site to a marketplace to a stage. This course will center the urban streetscape as a lens to explore culture, style, urban design, architecture and history.

There are countless stories waiting to be told, right in front of our eyes, as we go about life in New York City. What are those [orange funnels](#) sticking out of the ground all over the streets? Is the [water that drips from the subway](#) dangerous? Is there a reason for the green globes by subway stations?

In this course, students will develop strong observing, reporting and writing skills. Students will be trained on how to identify potential stories and what angles to explore. They'll be taught interview techniques and how to write with whimsy – these stories are great opportunities for experimenting and being artful with writing. Students will also learn how to pitch editors at publications and how to share their works in multimedia formats, such as filming informative vertical videos for TikTok or Instagram.

Mission

This course is aimed at instructing students on every step of the story production process, including ideating, reporting techniques, the craft of writing and sharing final works. On coming up with ideas, the difficulty is that many of these stories lie in plain sight; we're so used to seeing these subjects on a daily basis that they've become invisible. Developing a strong observational practice – centered around making the invisible visible – is a crucial component of this course. Students interested in creative writing, open to letting their curiosity take them on an unexpected journey and passionate about the city will thrive in this course.

Learning Goals

- Sharpen observational and story finding skills
- Develop a unique writerly voice
- Deepen source-finding techniques (consider diversity in sourcing, learn where to find interviewees, best and safe practices in approaching people, leveraging social media to find sources)
- Build source management and interviewing techniques
- Finding a platform for stories (print/digital publications or social media)
- Pitching and building relationships with editors
- Thinking outside the box with story ideas and forms

Course Structure

Course meetings will typically consist of a guest lecture followed by a Q&A with them, an instructional lecture given by the professor on a specific skill as well as an in-class assignment or local site visit. Certain chunks of time will also be devoted to going over and sharing student work, as well as discussing assigned readings or viewings.

Guest Speakers

Throughout the course, students will hear from 6 guest speakers, whose backgrounds and expertise will range widely. Guest speakers will include traditional print and digital journalists, as well as video producers and graphics reporters. Some cover fashion, culture and lifestyle, while others cover more hard news beats. They work at New York Magazine, The New York Times and more.

Readings/Viewings

- John Wilson's HBO episode "[How To Put Up Scaffolding](#)"
- Georges Perec's "An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris"
- "[Stop Ignoring All the Mundane Miracles in Your Life](#)," NYT
- "[Not Just a Fence: The Story of a Stainless Steel Status Symbol](#)," NYT
- "[Suddenly It's Bare Season](#)," NYT
- "[Orange Steam Funnels Are a New York Symbol. What Are They For?](#)" NYT
- "[What's in the Subway Water That Drips on Your Head?](#)" New York Magazine
- "[Jackson Heights, Global Town Square](#)," NYT
- "[Anatomy of a \\$9 Burglary](#)," Newsday
- Robert Caro's [Jones Beach tally](#) for "The Power Broker" (video), YouTube
- "[Listening In on Line at Glossier](#)," New York Magazine

Assignments (in-class and at-home)

- Developing and keeping an observation journal
- Turning an observation into a story (students will be asked to develop multiple angles and questions that they would ask if they were to take deeper dive into a specific object, trend or person they see)

- Site visits (we'll go to numerous public sites across the city and do exercises in eavesdropping, people watching and other observational methods. We'll share/review our observations together)
- Write a "[Neighborhood Joint](#)" (writing about a local business or site that is meaningful for the neighborhood's residents, this will be an exercise in scene setting, interviewing and finding the right place)
- Produce a story on social media about a specific city block or piece of infrastructure (e.g. Instagram carousel, vertical video — this will teach students visual and short-form storytelling skills. The exercise will also train them on how to identify overlooked locations as subjects for deeper exploration, what questions to ask and which research techniques to utilize)
- Pitch and write a feature-length story (this will be the capstone project where students pull together everything they've learned over the course into one project that they come up with the idea for and report out themselves. Students will be encouraged to pitch this project to publications)

Course Requirements

- Attendance and punctuality: Your presence at every course meeting is mandatory, given the intensive nature of the class. Let's discuss any major conflicts or potential issues ahead of time. If anything serious and unpredictable comes up, such as illness, please alert me immediately and we'll discuss a workaround. Additionally, please be sure to arrive at each meeting on time.
- Assignment submissions: Late submissions will result in grade deductions — for each day that the assignment is overdue, it will be reduced by a full-letter grade.
- Curiosity: What you get out of this class is dependent on what you put into it. The more engaged and present you are, the more you'll walk away with. This type of writing is only strong when the writer themselves is inherently curious about the world and people around them.

About the Professor

Anna Kodé is a features reporter with The New York Times, where she covers the intersection of culture and real estate. Her reporting has taken her to [Mattel's Barbie archives](#), [Joan Didion's estate sale](#) and [a town for spiritualist mediums](#). Two years in a row, she's won silver awards from the National Association of Real Estate Editors for best architecture story — for her reporting on the cultural significance of [stainless steel fences](#) and the rise of "[anytown architecture](#)." She's passionate about stories that are hidden in plain sight and allow us to re-examine subjects we thought we already knew.

Anna started at The Times in 2021 as a reporting fellow on the Styles section, where she wrote about fashion, youth trends and internet culture. Prior to that, she worked as a fact checker at Time Magazine. Anna graduated from Cornell University in 2019, and grew up between upstate New York and Hyderabad, India.

Diversity & Inclusion

Fostering an inclusive learning environment is central to the mission of this course as well the Institute. All students — regardless of class, background, age, sex, gender, race, ethnicity, ability or any identity category — shall be treated as equal members of the group. Our varying backgrounds, perspectives and identities enhance the community of the classroom. Not only is this important to the way we act within the classroom, but also the work we create together. Diversity in sourcing for our stories is considered crucial.

Class Etiquette

Course meetings are spaces for open discussion and intellectual curiosity to thrive. Students shall act with respect towards peers as well as guest speakers, sources and the communities they find themselves in while reporting. The usage of phones, social media or messaging during class sessions — except for when it is directly related to a class assignment — is not permitted.

Accommodations

If you're a student with a disability or special needs, please contact New York University's [Moses Center](#) for Students with Disabilities at 212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu. The Moses Center is at 726 Broadway, floor 2.