

New York University
Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute
JOUR-UA 201.005// Albert Class Number: 2398

THE BEAT: The Sporting Life

SPRING 2025

Professor: Francis Flaherty
Monday, 11:00 AM - 2:40 PM
20 Cooper Square, Room 659

To contact professor: fjl@nyu.edu
Phone: 718.938.0663
Office hours: To Be Determined

Course Description

They say all politics is local, and the same is true of journalism. People are endlessly curious about local news. The focus of this course is one of the richest areas of local news: sports.

In this class, students serve as “sports correspondents” for New York City, exploring, reporting and writing about sports and fitness and related endeavors. The sports range from bowling to tennis to swimming to cycling to skateboarding to parkour to roller derby. There are axe throwing, bodybuilding and spin classes. Sports are not just for the physically fit, either. There are bar games like darts and pool, too.

The sports envisioned by this course can be indoors or (as the weather warms) outdoors. They can be professional or amateur events or even pick-up games at the playground. They can be team endeavors or individual ones, and they can be fitness activities, too. Hot yoga, tai chi, Pilates -- all are eligible areas.

The athletes or exercisers themselves are only part of the beat; there are also many activities related to sports or fitness. Students might profile a popular skateboard designer, or an avid collector of sport stars’ autographs. They might follow a band of obsessive college basketball fans who wear outlandish costumes to every game. They might report on an important volleyball game at Chelsea Piers, or visit one of the many pubs that serve as outposts for fans of out-of-town teams. (Green Bay Packer fans gather at Kettle of Fish in Greenwich Village, for example.)

Culturally diverse New York City offers a long menu of ethnic sports as well, from the Jamaican cricket players in Prospect Park to the elderly Italian men playing bocce in Little Italy. The city's many schools are full of inspiring sports stories, too – the sophomore who is nationally ranked in fencing, the fabled basketball rivalry between two high schools.

Sports is a huge business, of course, so there is also, say, the former felon trying to launch a career as a personal trainer, or the shopkeeper who sells baseball memorabilia or gearless bikes or skateboards. Then there's the guy who scalps tickets at Madison Square Garden.

Why are sports and fitness a good topic for a course? Because they are a major way that people socialize, from the creative street games that kids invent, to the running clubs founded by drug addicts trying to shake their addiction, to the bowling leagues that senior citizens join to stay healthy. In fact, sports and fitness encompass many major aspects of life: competition, passion, discipline, heartbreak, triumph, excitement, courage, failure, money.

More broadly, this course will use sports and fitness as a lens to examine the fundamentals of journalism, familiarize students with the concept of the beat, sharpen their reporting skills and scrutinize and practice the craft of writing.

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

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. 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 Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute is committed to creating an anti-racist learning

environment that embraces diversity, complexity, and honesty. We are an intellectual community enriched by diversity along a number of dimensions, including race, sex, gender identity, class, ethnicity, sexualities, abilities, religion, and culture. Our student body is excitingly international. We welcome a multiplicity of perspectives. We acknowledge that listening to other perspectives on some of these issues may be personally challenging, and we accept that challenge. We further acknowledge that our profession, journalism, and our home, New York University, have participated in the systemic racism that underpins U.S. history. We are committed to teaching and practicing fair, rigorous, and engaged journalism that helps all our communities move toward justice and equality.

Course Structure

The course will consist of mini-lectures, readings, in-class appraisal of those readings, in-class “craft of writing” exercises, peer review of student drafts, writing and rewriting of reporting assignments, and student in-class presentations. We may have Times reporters and other guest speakers as well. We will study the journalistic arts in roughly the order they pop up in an assignment—starting with the hunt for story ideas, and proceeding to the art of the interview, reporting strategies, article organization, the craft of writing, and the editing and proofreading of drafts.

Readings

The required text is “The Elements of Story: A Field Guide to Writing Nonfiction,” by Francis Flaherty. The book is available at the NYU Bookstore, Bobst Library and on Amazon and other online and brick-and-mortar booksellers.

We will also discuss standout articles, past and present. Writers will include marquee folks like A. J. Liebling, Joseph Mitchell, Pete Hamill, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, Richard Preston, and Kevin Baker, as well as reporters from the Times, the New Yorker and elsewhere. For all these articles we will ask: Is the underlying concept of the article smart? Is the reporting thorough? Is the organization logical and smooth? Is the writing compelling? Always, we’ll analyze with an eye to learning lessons we can apply to our own pieces.

Course Requirements

Students are expected to comb their unique neighborhood beats for story ideas, which means hunting for them on the street, on the phone and online. Then you will report out those ideas fully and fairly (and in pandemic safe ways of course), write them up on time and revise them based on peer review and professor review. You will also do the assigned readings and be ready to discuss them in class. You must attend class regularly, and participate actively in class discussions. Most important, you must help your fellow classmates with their work – contributing reporting tips, writing advices and suggesting possible sources.

Grading

Final grades will be calculated as follows:

There will be four beat papers of increasing length, and they will collectively account for 65 percent of the final grade: Paper 1 (500 words) —10%; Paper 2 (600 words) —15%; Paper 3 (750 words) --20%; and Paper 4 (1,100 words)—20%. Class attendance and participation will account for 25 percent. Occasional quizzes on assigned readings will account for the remaining 10 percent. In addition, in some cases improvement during the course may be factored into grades, and, equally important, grades can be lowered for any of the following reasons: lateness to or absence from class, late or undelivered assignments and of course plagiarism, invented sources or other unethical conduct.

CLASS CALENDAR

JAN. 27 Sports in New York City: An Introduction Finding and evaluating ideas for local sports/athletics/fitness stories: Print and Web resources. Community boards, block associations, parks departments, local high schools and colleges, sports leagues, runners clubs, pools, fans and their world, and the plethora of professional sports teams of which New York can boast – more than any other city in the world.

“Local” doesn’t mean “little” – major sports issues, like concussions and CTE, have local as well as national focuses.

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?

- Exercise: The Ice Breaker

Homework:

*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).

Feb. 3 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)

FEB 10. 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

Homework

- Reading: “The Extremist,” by Michael Specter (New Yorker)
- Report and write draft of Paper 1

FEB. 17. PRESIDENTS’ DAY – NO CLASS

FEB. 18 (Tuesday, Not Monday) 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
- 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)

FEB. 24 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 1

Homework

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

MARCH 3 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 2

Homework

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

MARCH 10 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 3

Homework

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

MARCH 24 SPRING BREAK NO CLASS

MARCH 31. 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 4
- * 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 6/2
- * Reading: “Mountains of Pi,” by Richard Preston (The New Yorker)

APRIL 7. 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
- Editors of the Day 5, 6
- 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)

APRIL 14 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 7
- * Exercise: Reporter at the Video

Homework

- Write draft of Paper 4

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

APRIL 21 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 8, 9
- Peer Review: Paper 4 draft

Homework

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

APRIL 28 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 10
- Workshop: Final Reporting and Writing Issues with Paper

- **MAY 5. Lecture: The Pitch – Journalism’s Coin of the Re**
Lecture: Words Are Not Enough – Nonwords are a language too.