Writing the Long-Form

Professor Adam L. Penenberg
Email: adam.penenberg@nyu.edu
Thursday, 1:30 p.m. to 5:10 p.m., 7th Fl. Library
Office hours: Tuesday, 3 p.m. to 5 p.m., Thursday, 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., and by appointment.

Course Description

This seminar focuses on the various components that comprise in-depth magazine stories, as well as non-fiction books, screenplays, TV scripts and treatments. We’ll dissect great modern and classic magazine stories, books, book proposals, screenplays, movie treatments and teleplays for story, character arc, dialogue, scenes, structure, transitions, verb tense, point of view and style. The goal is to create memorable narrative non-fiction stories that hold a reader’s attention to the last page.

This is a challenging course with a heavy reading load and a high bar for writing assignments, befitting third-semester graduate journalism students. There are a number of assignments, including a profile, a first-person narrative, in-class writing exercises, a case study involving an in-depth interview with a working journalist, and pop quizzes, culminating in a 3,000+-word feature story replete with scenes, character, dialogue, and/or analysis. We’ll do a lot of workshopping in class, and along the way work on your pitches, research, and interview techniques, time management, outlines, editing and multiple drafts, and other challenges that confront the professional non-fiction narrative writer. I may also from time to time invite well-known writers to class to dissect their own and others’ stories.

Required Texts

Seabiscuit: An American Legend, by Laura Hillenbrand

Blood Highways, by Adam L. Penenberg

Dead Wake: The Last Crossing of the Lusitania, by Erik Larson

You can find them used or buy them on Amazon as a Kindle e-book for far less.
I'll provide links to magazine stories and plenty of other resources over the course of the semester. Be sure you have access to the Internet and your email while in class. Bring a laptop!

**Assignments**

1. Profile (1500 words) = 20% of your final grade. Some or all of this material can be used in your final capstone project.

2. First-person story—an article featuring you (1500 words) = 20%.

3. Journalist case study: Interview a working journalist about a favorite narrative story = 10%.

4. Final Capstone Feature (3,000+ words) = 40%. This requires three drafts and you must file each draft of your capstone on time. For each missed deadline, I will deduct half a point from your final grade. You must have your topic nailed down by Oct. 6th.

5. In-class assignments and pop quizzes on assigned reading = 10%.

Looking for long-form articles to read? A terrific resource is Nieman Storyboard: [http://www.niemanstoryboard.org/category/whys-this-so-good/](http://www.niemanstoryboard.org/category/whys-this-so-good/)

The Pulitzer Prize Website has a trove of wonderful material: [http://www.pulitzer.org/pulitzer-stories](http://www.pulitzer.org/pulitzer-stories)

**A Word on Trigger Warnings**

Over the past few years a heated debate has raged in academia (if you can say anything rages in academia) over the use of “trigger warnings.” One common definition of a trigger warning is “a statement at the start of a piece of writing, video, etc., alerting the reader or viewer to the fact that it contains potentially distressing material (often used to introduce a description of such content).”

Trigger warning proponents point out that some students in any given class may have suffered some level of trauma, whether it arises from sexual assault, violence, or other types of abuse. They should therefore receive fair
warning when a reading or discussion relates to material that could cause them discomfort.

Critics of trigger warnings contend that the world is often messy, disturbing, and violent, and that graduate school is a time for intellectual growth. Therefore a professor’s role is to challenge students so they learn to engage rationally with arguments, ideas, opinions, and principles they might find upsetting or deeply offensive.

While NYU does not subscribe to any university-wide position on trigger warnings—the administration advises anyone who might be traumatized by a reading or video to seek appropriate help at the university’s health center—the journalism faculty believes our entire profession should come stamped with a giant trigger warning. Part of what we do as journalists is to seek the truth no matter where it may lead. This sometimes takes us into violent, disturbing places.

In this course we will read and discuss articles that deal with disturbing themes. If you believe this could trigger in you any psychological or health problems, contact NYU Wellness Exchange, located at 726 Broadway, 4th floor. The 24-hour Wellness Hotline is 212-443-9999.

At times you may find yourself vehemently disagreeing with the writer of an essay, article, feature story, interview subject on camera, another student, guest, or your professor. I encourage you to speak up and share your perspectives, but do it in a way that fosters mutual respect. Be aware that reasonable people can have views that may appear “extreme” to some.

The Syllabus

A syllabus is a guidepost for the semester. While I’ll try to adhere to this schedule we may skip around if the natural flow of the lessons dictate. No class is the same; if you have additional ideas for topics we should cover, I'm all ears. Sometimes links to articles can disappear or change. If so, let me know and I’ll find alternative sources. While I expect you to read all assigned material that doesn’t mean we will have the time to discuss everything in class. Nevertheless, these are high quality stories well worth the read. By analyzing them you will be further on your way to becoming a better writer.
Schedule

*Stories are a communal currency of humanity.* —Tahir Shah, in *Arabian Nights*

**Week 1**

- The power of story.
- What makes a great magazine story?
- Reading as a reader v. reading as a writer.
- Ethics: Plagiarism, fabulism, attribution, getting in trouble-ism.
- Time management tips.
- Finding topics to write about.
- The art of the story pitch.
- In-class assignment: secrets.

Read for next class:

- “How to Write a Profile Feature Article,” by The New York Times:  
  [https://www.nytimes.com/learning/students/writing/voices.html](https://www.nytimes.com/learning/students/writing/voices.html)

- “New York Is Killing Me,” by Alec Wilkinson, New Yorker:  

- “Agent of Disruption,” by Steve Bertoni, Forbes:  

- “The Town Car 500,” by Jennifer Gonnerman, New York Magazine:  

- “The Troll’s Lawyer,” by Adam Penenberg, Backchannel-Medium:  
  [https://medium.com/backchannel/the-trolls-lawyer-8bf7b2283#.cziigand9](https://medium.com/backchannel/the-trolls-lawyer-8bf7b2283#.cziigand9)

- “Ann Coulter is a Human Being,” by Mitchell Sunderland, Vice:  
**Start thinking about your capstone project. We’ll budget time in each class to check in.**

Stories tell us of what we already knew and forgot, and remind us of what we haven’t yet imagined. —Anne L. Watson

**Week 2**

The art of the profile.
Dissecting profiles for structure, style, and technique.
Ethics: On-the-record, off-the-record, not-for-attribution, on background; surreptitiously recording conversations.
The key to dramatic conflict; tension and release; doling out material and withholding information for maximum effect.
Zooming in vs. wide-angle lens, narrative threads and angles.
How to outline long-form narrative features.
Capstone status.

For next class:

Come up with a profile subject. Before you pitch in class be sure that you have access. Remember: boring people produce boring stories, so find someone doing something interesting or important. **Profile due Oct. 6th** at the start of class. No extensions.

View “Kurt Vonnegut on the Shapes of Stories” (short video): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oP3c1h8v2ZQ

Read Seabiscuit.

*Story is a yearning meeting an obstacle.* —Robert Olen Butler

**Week 3**

Profile pitches.
Discussion of Seabiscuit.
Action scenes and creating characters (and character arcs) that readers care about to drive your narrative; descriptions; weaving personal history through your story.
Story structure: Ledes, nut graf, scenes, themes, and transitions.
Interviewer styles (handout): The “casual conversationalist,” “dart thrower,” “machine gunner,” “interrupter,” “the red flag;”
taping vs. taking notes.
In-class exercise: early memories.
Capstone status.

Read for next class:

“Magazines, Bring Back the Write-Around,” by Ron Rosenbaum, Slate:
thttp://www.slate.com/articles/life/the_spectator/2007/10/magazines_bring_back_the_writearound.html

“The Secret History of Tiger Woods,” by Wright Thompson, ESPN:

“Frank Sinatra Has A Cold,” by Gay Talese, Esquire:
thttp://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a638/frank-sinatra-has-a-cold-gay-talese/


"Speaking to the subject is the most overrated thing in journalism. I’ve written profiles where you never even meet the person. —David Remnick"

Week 4
The write-around.
In-class exercise: the opposing viewpoint.
Capstone status.

Due next class:

First draft of your 1500-word profile, no extensions.

"In character, in manner, in style, in all things, the supreme excellence is simplicity. —Henry Wadsworth Longfellow"

Week 5
Profile due.
Editing workshop: We’ll break into small groups, each led by a
professional editor/writer, to work on your profiles.
Rewrite strategies.
Capstone status.

Read for next class (Oct. 20\textsuperscript{th}):


“Rubbish!” by Chris Lydgate, Willamette Week: \url{http://www.wweek.com/Portland/article-1616-rubbish.html}


“My Four Months As a Private Prison Guard,” by Shane Bauer, Mother Jones: \url{http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/06/cca-private-prisons-corrections-corporation-inmates-investigation-bauer}

View:

10 Hours of Walking in NYC as a Woman (short video): \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1XGPvbWn0A}

Black Man v. White Man Open Carrying AR-15 Legally (short video): \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BKGZnB41_e4}

Final draft of your profile due Oct. 20\textsuperscript{th}, no extensions.
Man, sometimes it takes you a long time to sound like yourself. —Miles Davis

Week 6  NO CLASS

Great stories happen to those who can tell them. —Ira Glass

Week 7  Final draft of your profile due.
You, the story (stunt journalism).
In-class assignment: creative description.
Present v. past tense; avoiding past participle; embracing immediacy.
Use of quotes and dialogue; the use of said and says.

Read for next class:


Due next class:

A 750- to 1,000-word piece that features you, written in first person, doing something interesting. Most of all, it must have storytelling. You could write about attending a cat convention and interacting with weird pet owners or conducting a sociological experiment on NYC’s subways. You could spend an entire weekend spending only Bitcoin for food and entertainment or playing the tenor saxophone or didgeridoo in Washington Park to see what happens.
There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you. —Maya Angelou

Week 8

Workshopping your first-person stories.
True crime; writing riveting stories from court documents.

Read for next class:

Blood Highways, by Adam L. Penenberg

“The Terminator” (film treatment) and book proposals (handout).

“Grey’s Anatomy Bible” (handout)


Also, line up a journalist to interview for your case study (due Nov. 10).

There's always room for a story that can transport people to another place.
—J.K. Rowling

Week 9

Pitch your journalist case study subject.
Discussion of Blood Highways
The art of the book proposal, film treatment, and TV.
Journalism case studies (handout)
Due next class:

Journalist’s case study: Interview a journalist about a favorite narrative non-fiction longread (1,000 words). **No extensions.**

Read:


*Those who tell the stories rule the world.* —Hopi proverb

**Week 10**  
Journalist case study due.  
Writing about the unexpected.  
Verbal pitch tips: pitching to editors  
Capstone status.

*Storytelling is the most powerful way to put ideas into the world today.* — Robert McKee

**Week 11**  
Editors roundtable. Pitch your capstone stories to a panel of magazine editors and writers, who will offer feedback.

Read for next class:

“The First to Fly: The True Story of Two Eccentric 18th Century Inventors” (handout) and “Two Men. Two Planes. One Race to Conquer the World,” by Adam L. Penenberg,

*Being a writer is like having homework every night for the rest of your life.* - Lawrence Kasdan

Nov. 24    THANKSGIVING

*Sometimes reality is too complex. Stories give it form.* —Jean Luc Godard

Week 12    First draft of your capstone due.
Discussion of *Dead Wake* and *Sky Rivals*: Historical narrative non-fiction (or how to write about dead people); reconstructing events and combining various sources into an engaging narrative.
Editing workshop: We’ll break into small groups, each led by a professional editor/writer, to work on your drafts.

Read for next class:

“A Rape on Campus: A Brutal Assault and Struggle for Justice at UVA”: Rolling Stone:

Rolling Stone editor’s note:
http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/a-rape-on-campus-20141119#ixzz3NdXmIamg

“Rolling Stone and UVA: The Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism Report: An Anatomy of a Journalistic Failure,” by Sheila Coronel, Steve Coll, Derek Kravitz, Rolling Stone: Read more:
http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/a-rape-on-campus-what-went-wrong-20150405#ixzz3y6uXcGs9
“Dr. V’s Magical Putter,” by Caleb Hannan, Grantland:
http://grantland.com/features/a-mysterious-physicist-golf-club-dr-v/


“The Voyeur’s Motel,” by Gay Talese, New Yorker:
http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/04/11/gay-talese-the-voyeurs-motel

*Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it.* — Hannah Arendt

**Week 13** When stories go horribly awry: Rolling Stone, Grantland, The New Yorker. 
Workshopping your capstones: We’ll break into small groups led by professional editors and writers to peer review your drafts.

*The stories we tell literally make the world. If you want to change the world, you need to change your story.* — Michael Margolis

**Week 14** Capstone final draft due.
Jobs talk: networking, cover letters, resume, interview techniques, and how to get a job in journalism.