It’s a journalistic axiom that profiles are great fun to read but devilishly hard to write. And the best, and trickiest, profiles are “critical profiles” — pieces that tell the story not just of a person but of an idea. As we’ll see, the best profiles combine extensive quotation with first-hand observation; salient biographical anecdotes; detailed analyses of the subject’s writings, artwork, performances, or public appearances; and illuminating comments by friends, colleagues, and adversaries — all melded into a cohesive, gripping narrative.

We’ll learn to do this by both reading and writing. Readings in this course will span history, politics, literature, academia, art, and popular culture. We’ll analyze the ways journalists — well-known and lesser-known — have negotiated the profile’s challenges. We’ll read pieces by many of the genre’s most talented practitioners and meet some of these journalists in class. I expect you to come to class having thoroughly digested the readings and ready to discuss them. Along the way, you’ll acquire a sense of the idea profile’s history: its grounding in the 1930s, its imaginative development in the New Journalism of the 1960s, and its flourishing today in The New Yorker, The New York Times Magazine, Rolling Stone, and many other publications.

There will be three major assignments. The first is a magazine-style Q&A with a different notable figure, to run no more than 1,000 words, including an introduction. The second will be a tightly focused, Talk of the Town-style mini-profile (no more than 800-1000 words). The class will culminate in a full-length profile (3,500-4,000 words), for which you will submit a first draft and a revision. The process of writing this piece is nearly as important as the finished product. You will also be required to submit a written pitch for each piece.

Most classes will include a workshop component in which you will have the opportunity to read and respond to each other’s writing or to share questions about work underway. It is absolutely crucial that you complete assignments on time so that you are able to participate fully.

Books:
Writing a Woman’s Life by Carolyn Heilbrun
Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man by Henry Louis Gates
The Silent Woman by Janet Malcolm
plus additional readings to be distributed electronically

Course Policies:
Email is my preferred method of contact. I travel frequently for research, so it may take up to 48 hours for me to respond. (In other words, don’t wait to the last minute to email questions about an assignment.)

Electronic devices may be used in class for taking notes or referring to the readings if you prefer not to print them. Please do us all the courtesy of refraining from using email, texting, social media, or anything else of the kind during class. There will be a break period in each session during which we can all check back in with the world. *Note: if this policy is violated, electronics will be banned from the classroom.

Writing assignments will constitute 75% of your grade. Class participation will constitute the remaining 25%. Late assignments will be marked down.
week 1: Sept 8: introduction
“Forty-One False Starts” by Janet Malcolm

week 2: Sept 15: classics of the form: 1930s-1950s
reading:
  • Janet Flanner, “Führer,” New Yorker, February-March 1936
  • Joseph Mitchell, “Mazie,” New Yorker, 12/21/40
  • Joseph Mitchell, “Mr. Hunter’s Grave,” New Yorker, 9/22/56
  • Truman Capote, “The Duke in His Domain,” New Yorker, 11/9/57

week 3: Sept 22: the Q&A
assignment: pitch for Q&A due
reading: selections from NYT magazine, TNR interviews, GQ&A, and elsewhere

week 4: Sept 29: short takes
assignment: Q&A due
reading: selections from Talk of the Town, etc
guest: Matt Zeitlin, BuzzFeed -- read “Finance Elite Mourn a Banker, and a Vanished Wall Street,” buzzfeed.com, 7/29/14

assignment: pitch for miniprofile due
reading:
  • Gay Talese, “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold,” Esquire, April 1966
guest: Marc Tracy, New York Times -- read “The Man with the Kind Face,” TNR, 3/20/13

[no class Oct 13 – Columbus Day]

week 6: Oct 20: classics of the form, 1980s and onward
assignment: miniprofile due
reading:
  • Ian Frazier, “Nobody Better, Better Than Nobody,” New Yorker, 2/21/83 (Heloise)
  • Calvin Trillin, “Covering the Cops,” New Yorker, 2/17/86 (Edna Buchanan)

week 7: Oct 27: the literary profile
reading: finalize subject of long profile
  • Larissa MacFarquhar, “Present Waking Life,” New Yorker, 11/7/05 (John Ashbery)
**week 8: Nov 3:** how did I get here? voice and narrative presence  
**assignment:** writing plan for long profile due  
**reading:**  
- Dan Lee, “‘I Just Want to Feel Everything’” *New York*, 6/17/12 (Fiona Apple)  
- Edith Zimmerman, “Chris Evans Is Captain America,” *GQ*, July 2011  
- Emma Carmichael, “Sexile in Guyville,” *Gawker*, 3/22/12

**week 9: Nov 10:** race  
**reading:**  
- selections from *Thirteen Ways of Looking at A Black Man* by Henry Louis Gates  

**week 10: Nov 17:** gender  
**reading:**  
- *Writing a Woman’s Life*, by Carolyn Heilbrun  
- Vanessa Grigoriadis, “A Death of One’s Own,” *New York* magazine, 12/8/03  
**guest:** Kate Bolick

**week 11: Nov 24:** adventures in biography  
**assignment:** first draft of long profile due  
**reading:**  
- Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman*

**week 12: Dec 1:** politics  
**reading:**  
- Paul Berman, *Flight of the Intellectuals* (selections)  
- Ian Buruma, New York Times magazine profile of Tariq Ramadan  
- Janet Reitman, “Jahar’s World,” *Rolling Stone*, 7/17/13 (Dzokhar Tsarnaev)  
**guest:** Meline Toumani

**week 13: Dec 8:** master class  
**reading:**  
- Larissa MacFarquhar, “Chef on the Edge,” *New Yorker*, (David Chang)  
- Larissa MacFarquhar, “Two Heads,” *New Yorker*, 2/12/07 (Churchlands)  
- Larissa MacFarquhar, “The Movie Lover,” *New Yorker*, 10/20/03 (Tarantino)  
**guest:** Larissa MacFarquhar

**week 14: Dec 10:** conclusion  
**assignment:** revision of long profile due
How to Read a Profile

Lede: What does the lede tell us about how the story will develop? Why has the author chosen this particular way of beginning? What avenues does it open up or shut off?

Structure: How is the profile put together?

Sources: Who are the primary sources? How many sources are there? Is the subject a significant source or is the profile a write-around? What other research went into the piece?

Quotations: What is the relationship of quotes to exposition? Are quotes long and rambling or short and succinct? How do quotes reveal the subject’s voice?

Scenes: What are the major scenes? Was the profile writer present, or did he/she hear about them from others?

Background: How is the subject’s background introduced? Where does it fit in

Narrative presence: Is the journalist openly present in the piece or concealed? What effect does this presence/concealment have on the piece?

Theme and context: What are the big ideas? Are they openly stated or lurking in the background? What context do we need in order to appreciate the subject?

Style: What’s notable about the author’s style?

Kicker: How does the piece conclude?

Evaluation: Do you think the piece is successful? If you were editing it, what would you ask the writer to do differently?