

JOU 4311-17C2
Narrative Nonfiction
Wednesdays periods 6-8 (12:50 p.m. to 3:50 p.m.), 3334 Weimer Hall

Professor: **Moni Basu**

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Office Hours: **Wednesdays from 10-noon or anytime by appointment**

The difference between literature and journalism is that journalism is unreadable, and literature is not read. – **Oscar Wilde**

Perhaps it's true that few people read literature but I take issue with Mr. Wilde's statement about journalism. Literature and journalism each have its merits and I would argue that the intersection between the two is wholly readable and a whole lot of fun to report and write. Some call this genre of writing "literary journalism" or "creative non-fiction." Writer John McPhee calls it "the literature of fact." We'll call it narrative non-fiction and you will soon find out the reason behind my preference.

This class is all about in-depth storytelling and it's my hope that by the end of our time together, you will be able to answer these questions: How do you find and tell a good story? How do you build characters who evoke emotions and write vivid scenes? And, how do you hook readers and make them want to keep reading all the way to the end?

We will discuss how to report and write long-form narratives. We will explore best practices for interviews, research, reconstruction and immersion reporting as well as the mechanics of solid writing: organization, structure and the narrative arc. You'll be plunging into the toolkit of fiction writers to develop characters and scenes, capture dialogue and experiment with non-linear structure (all sure to make Mr. Wilde very happy) but of course, you are all journalists (unlike Mr. Wilde) and everything you write must be true.

You will be expected to produce engaging, accurate, high-quality work that is worthy of publication. It seems a simple task. Writer Margaret Atwood put it this way: "A word after a word after a word is power." But it's not easy to do well.

This is an advanced reporting and writing class and you will be challenged. You will have to work very hard to earn a high grade in this class. But I hope you will enjoy the process. And that you will be bold and brave with your writing; that you will stretch and take risks with

your words; and help your readers make sense of the world. I will be pushing you to write not just with your brain but also with your heart and soul.

You can only grow as a writer through practice and then, more practice. And by reading everything you can. You will be reading a LOT in this class. And you will be speaking a LOT. Our class time together will be a combination of lectures, discussion and writing activities.

Here are a few things we will focus on:

- Idea generation for relevant and interesting stories
- How to refine and articulate your ideas and pitch them to editors
- The difference between a feature story and a true narrative
- How to report and interview for narrative
- Developing your style and voice
- Story organization and structure
- Borrowing from the fiction writer's toolkit
- Self-editing
- Ethical issues

GRADING

I understand that grading your work is not an exact science and I encourage you to speak with me if you are distressed about a grade. That said, please note that there are NO shortcuts in this class. You will be judged on the quality of your work. Grades will be posted in Canvas. Your final grade will be determined based on the following points:

Long-form story: 500 points

Here is the breakdown for the 500 points:

Story pitch: 50 points

Plan of action and story outline: 25 points each

Scene 1: 50 points

Scene 2: 50 points

First draft: 100 points

Final draft: 200 points

In-class and other writing assignments: 200 points

Reading response to book: 100 points

Class participation (this includes 100 points for PackBack discussions): 200 points

Grading scale:

A	925-1000
A-	900-924
B+	875-899
B	825-874
B-	800-824
C+	775-799
C	725-774
C-	700-724
D+	675-699
D	625-674
D-	600-624
F	623 and below

More information on grades and grading policies is here:
<https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/grades.aspx>

REQUIRED READING:

There are no textbooks for this class. But as I already mentioned, you will be busy reading. Here is the reading list:

- *Storycraft* by Jack Hart (available on Amazon)
- A narrative nonfiction book from a list that I will provide once class begins
- Assigned feature stories and podcasts

SUPPLIES

You will need notebooks and a recording device, if your phone does not have a voice recorder. You will also need to bring to class a pen with red ink for peer review sessions. We will use email for filing your work and you may be asked to print out assignments and bring them to class on the due date.

You should have by now received an email which guides you on how to sign up for a PackBack account, which you will use for online discussions. I have included the instructions further down. The fee is \$25.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

You will be producing one highly reported and nuanced long-form narrative of at least 2,000 words that will be of publishable quality. Reporting notes and parts of your story are due on designated deadlines. In addition, you will be given writing exercises -- both in and out of class -- throughout the semester.

You may find in your reporting that an idea is not working out. That's why you will be expected to come up with more than one long-form idea. You may be asked to discuss or brainstorm these in class.

You will also submit a written story pitch for approval along with a plan of action that includes how you will choose your characters and any anticipated reporting challenges.

That bar is set high in this class. You will be expected to publish your piece. You should strive to see your story in a magazine, newspaper or online publication.

ACCURACY, FAIRNESS AND STYLE

Even though we will be immersed in techniques borrowed from the world of fiction, never forget that this is journalism class. You must review your stories and double check every fact. Inaccuracies or fabrication will not be tolerated. You are expected to have a strong command of spelling and grammar and will lose points for mistakes. Your copy should be clean and polished when you turn it in.

You are also expected to engage in storytelling that is fair, complete and based on information gathered from diverse sources. A greater understanding of societal differences will help you become reporters who are sensitive, culturally aware and better equipped to write across differences. Please pay attention not just to race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation but also to class, age, education, geography, occupation and religion.

It's always best to conduct interviews in person. You may also speak with people by phone but avoid email interviews.

Your work must be grammatically correct and adhere to AP style. If you do not already own The Associated Press Stylebook and Manual, please buy one (either the online version or print edition available on Amazon). You will lose points on your assignments for grammar and style errors.

HONESTY AND INTEGRITY

The media plays a vital role in our democracy. The public depends on journalists for news and a deeper understanding of the world around them. As such, there is nothing more important than our honesty, fairness and credibility.

I cannot stress this enough: Plagiarism, fabrication and conflicts of interest will not be tolerated and you will fail the class.

By now, I'm sure all of you know the basic ethics code of journalism. But just in case: Plagiarism is stealing someone else's ideas or work, including copy from the Internet. Fabrication is the use of invented information or the falsification of material. Conflicts of interest include writing about your roommate, boyfriend, parents, business partners or

others with whom you have close relationships or financial ties. If you are unsure about whether you are facing a conflict of interest, please discuss with me.

You are expected to abide by the UF Honor Code, which you can read here:
<https://sccr.dso.ufl.edu/process/student-conduct-code/>

DEADLINES

In the world of professional journalism, deadlines are critical, as they will be in this class. Your assignments will be due by the end of the day on the deadline date. (That's 11:59 p.m.) After that, your piece will be considered a day late and you will lose points unless you have cleared it with me.

ATTENDANCE, PARTICIPATION AND DEMEANOR

This is NOT a lecture class. You will learn much from our discussions. We are a small class that meets once a week and you are expected to attend every week. You are expected to arrive to class on time and behave in a manner that is respectful to me and your fellow students. Please refrain from using cell phone or any other devices that ring, chirp, beep or make any other sounds. Please keep laptops closed unless you are asked to write in class. Your class notes must be handwritten. Also, please refrain from eating food and other distractions in class.

Your insights and comments should be respectful to all. Please note that participation doesn't just mean speaking a lot; you will be judged on the quality of what you say and how focused you are in class, even when you are not speaking.

Writers learn from one another, so you are expected to come to class each week and come fully prepared to participate in activities and discussions. Because your contribution is important, class participation makes up 200 points of your final grade. Of those, 100 points are for class discussions and exercises. You will lose 25 points for every unexcused absence. Absences for serious illness, family emergencies and other urgent matters will be excused only if you speak with me before class begins. If you need to miss multiple classes, you will be required to provide appropriate documentation of the problem. You will still be responsible for submitting on time all assignments on their due dates and for material covered in class. Instructions for all assignments will be given in class so it's in your best interest to make it to class each week.

The other 100 participation points is for [Packback Questions](#), an online discussion platform powered by artificial intelligence. This platform is specifically designed to encourage curiosity and increase critical thinking & writing skills. On Packback, you'll be encouraged and rewarded for asking complex questions about the power of story.

How to Register on Packback:

If you were on the original roster for this course, your account has already been created by Packback and added to the correct community.

1. Search your inbox for an email from holla@packback.co with the subject line “Finish registration for JOU 4311.” This may be hiding in spam, so search thoroughly!
2. Click “set account password” to get started! (If you already have a Packback account, just log in)
3. Once you’re logged in, click “join a community”. When this course’s community appears, click “join community”
4. Input payment information & follow the prompts to complete checkout.
5. Enter the community & start asking questions!

If you did not receive a welcome email, head to packback.co, create an account (use your school email!), and find our community with the community look-up key. (Note: this is not a payment or free access code!)

Every week, you must ask one PackBack question and post two responses by Sunday at 11:59 pm. Note: On Packback you can’t post early or late, you must post within the designated posting interval. Packback is worth 100 points, and is 10 percent of your overall course grade. So please take this seriously. You will receive six points for every question and two points for every response. You can earn extra credit for extra posts.

Note: Packback utilizes Artificial Intelligence that will moderate (remove) posts if they don’t meet the [Community Guidelines](#). If your post is moderated, you will receive a coaching email, prompting you to edit & re-submit for credit. However, it can take up to 24 hours for the Packback team to moderate a post and send a coaching email. This is why it is important that you complete your Packback questions and responses far before the deadline!

If you have ANY questions or concerns regarding Packback registration or throughout the semester, please contact the customer support team at holla@packback.co!

[Packback FAQ](#) ♦ [Coaching & Question Tutorial Video](#) ♦ [Curiosity Score FAQ](#) ♦ [Terms of Use](#)

UF STUDENT RESOURCES

If you need a little extra help with writing, organizing and editing your stories, the UF Writing Studio, located at 302 Tigert Hall, may be able to help. You can also get online tutoring. For more information, go to: <https://writing.ufl.edu/writing-studio/>

Your mental health is extremely important. The UF Counseling and Wellness Center is free for all students. Please use this fantastic resource if you are having trouble coping. You can reach a support staff member between 8am-5pm Monday through Friday at [352-392-1575](tel:352-392-1575). The center’s address is 3190 Radio Road. You can see all the services the center provides at: <https://counseling.ufl.edu/>

Students with disabilities requesting accommodations should first register with the Disability Resource Center by providing appropriate documentation. Once registered, students will receive an accommodation letter which must be presented to the instructor when requesting accommodation. Students with disabilities should follow this procedure as early as possible in the semester. Call 352-392-8565 or go to: www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/

ABOUT ME

I began my career as a journalist in Tallahassee (yeah, home of that “other” university that I confess I may still be rooting for) and have been reporting and editing now for 37 years. I covered the Iraq War since its inception in 2003. On several trips, I was embedded with the U.S. Army and earned the moniker, Evil Reporter Chick -- affectionately, of course. My e-book, Chaplain Turner’s War (2012, Agate Publishing) grew from a narrative series on an Army chaplain at war. I’m no super hero but I was featured in Marvel comics’ “Civil War” series. Most recently, I was a senior writer at CNN. This is my second year teaching in Gatorland. If there’s anything else you want to know, I am happy to oblige but you will get a good idea of my life by checking out my social media accounts.

You can find me on **Twitter: @TheMoniBasu**

Instagram: @evilreporterchick

And my journalist **Facebook page: <https://bit.ly/2KCXScJ>**

I’m a narrative nonfiction junkie. I love good writing and am here to help you become better writers. I want you to reach out and ask for help. I will make myself available.

SCHEDULE

This is an estimation of how we will proceed this semester and the schedule is subject to change depending on guest speakers and other needs of the class. Some readings are listed below; the weekly longform reading is not listed here and will be assigned in class and we will begin each class with a dissection of that story. All readings and assignments should be completed by the start of the due date class. I have listed only the deadlines for your main story; other writing assignments are TBD.

Week 1:

1/9: Introductions and syllabus. What is narrative?

Reading assignment: Story and theme. Introduction, Chapters 1 and 9, *Storycraft*

Week 2:

1/15: What is the story really about? Thinking like a storyteller. Generating strong ideas.

In-class idea brainstorm; choose nonfiction book to read

Reading assignment: Point of view, voice and style. Chapters 3 and 4, *Storycraft*

Week 3:

1/22: Reporting for narrative: Narrowing the lens and finding the right characters. Immersion versus reconstruction.

Reading assignment: Developing a character. Chapters 5, *Storycraft*

Week 4

1/29: Reporting for Narrative: Getting access and ethical dilemmas

Reading assignment: Reporting and ethics. Chapters 10 and 14, *Storycraft*

Week 5

2/5: Writing descriptive scenes. Writing cinematically. Using all your senses. Metaphors and details, details, details!

Due: Reporting plan for long-form story

Reading assignment: Scene. Chapter 6, *Storycraft*

Week 6

2/12: How to grab a reader's attention. Writing great ledes.

Reading assignment: Narratives. Chapters 11, 12, 13, *Storycraft*

Week 7

2.19: Guest speaker.

Due: One scene from your long-form story (50 points)

Reading assignment: Action. Chapter 7, *Storycraft*

Guest speaker assignment: TBD

Week 8

2/26: Open class discussion.

Reading assignment: TBD

Week 9

3/4: Spring Break. No class!

Writing assignment: Tell me a story about your Spring Break. 700 words.

Week 10

3/11: Guest speakers.

Reading assignment: TBD

Week 11

3/18: Organizing your story. Structure and the narrative arc.

Due: Story pitch and second scene from your story
Reading assignment: Structure. Chapter 2, *Storycraft*

Week 12

3/25: Self-editing and rewriting.

Due: 700-word narrative response to book

Due: First draft of story

Week 13

4/1: Book discussions. Come to class prepared to give a short presentation on the narrative merits of your book.

Reading assignment: Ethics. Chapter 14, *Storycraft*

Week 14

4/8: How to get published.

Week 15

4/15: Guest speaker.

Due: Second draft of story

Week 16

4/22: Last class. Open discussion.

Due on 4/19: Polished final draft of long-form story

Week 17

4/29: No final exam.