

JOU 4311-17C2
Narrative Nonfiction
Tuesdays periods 6-8 (12:50 p.m. to 3:50 p.m.), online on Zoom

Professor: **Moni Basu**

Office: **3327 Weimer Hall**

Email: Mbasu@ufl.edu

Phone: **352.273.3529 (o) or 404.217.1235 (m)**

Chat sessions: Wednesdays, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. – 9 p.m. Need to talk about class? The pandemic? Anything that is bugging you? I will make myself available either by phone or Zoom to meet with you during these hours. Please make an appointment first.

Hello.

Poet and playwright Oscar Wilde said: “The difference between literature and journalism is that journalism is unreadable, and literature is not read.” Harrumph!

I take issue with Mr. Wilde’s statement, especially the part about journalism. Literature and journalism each have its merits. I believe 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 nonfiction and you will soon find out the reason behind my preference.

Here is another observation from the great poet, writer and civil rights activist Maya Angelou: “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.” It’s true! You all have untold stories inside you, waiting to be shared with the world. And I want to help spare you the agony of never telling them.

So... **WELCOME** to this course! I love **storytelling** and am excited to share what I know about in-depth writing, rich with details, lively language, unforgettable characters and a plot that will keep your readers savoring every last sentence.

But 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? It is my hope that by the end of our time together, you will be able to practice the answers to these questions.

Together, we will discuss how to report and write long-form narratives. We will explore best practices for interviews, research, reconstruction and immersive reporting as well as the mechanics of solid writing: organization, structure and the narrative arc. We’ll plunge 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 hardly easy to do well.

This is an advanced reporting and writing class and you will be challenged. You will have to work extremely hard to earn a high grade. 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.

Unfortunately, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, this class will be held online via Zoom. This is far from ideal and I am truly sorry it has to be this way. I enjoy meeting my students every semester and I wish we could have in-person meetings. But these are circumstances beyond my control and the health and safety of everyone at UF are paramount. I assure you I will try and make this class as engaging as possible even though we will not be physically together. We will discuss some best practices for reporting, given the restrictions we are under due to social distancing. I understand the limitations in these trying times and we will navigate reporting challenges together. I am here to support you in every way.

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
- Immersive reporting versus reconstruction
- Interviewing for narrative and how to ask high-yield questions
- Developing your style and voice
- Story organization and structure (the narrative arc)
- Borrowing from the fiction writer's toolkit
- Self-editing and peer editing
- Ethical issues

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. You will 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. In addition, you will be given writing exercises -- both in and out of class -- throughout the semester. And you will write a narrative response to the book we will be reading together: *One Day* by Gene Weingarten.

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 will be asked to discuss or brainstorm these in class with me and your classmates. Writing is a solitary process, but good writers learn to lean on their editors and writers to help them through the process of producing eloquent and powerful prose. We will do the same in this class.

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

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Please take careful note of this section of the syllabus. These are principles that have always been extremely important to me and given the current climate in the United States, I believe them to be critical.

The UF Department of Journalism embraces a commitment toward an intellectual community enriched and enhanced by diversity along a number of dimensions. UF journalism courses are expected to help foster an understanding of the diversity of peoples and cultures and of the significance and impact of mass communications in a global society.

One of the topics we will be discussing in this class is how to report stories – **with empathy** -- about people who are vastly different from you or people who have been underrepresented in every segment of society, including in the media. By that I mean not only differences in **race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation but also class, age, religion, nationality, disability, culture and other visible and non-visible differences**. I consider our differences to be a great asset and this class is intended to realize the greatest potential of that asset. You will be exposed to a diverse array of reading materials and speakers.

I will show the utmost respect for you, no matter your background or perspective, and I expect that you will do the same for me as well as your fellow students. I hope to foster a Zoom classroom environment in which you will feel free to voice your thoughts and opinions without fear, intimidation, embarrassment or shame. Please let me know if you have any thoughts on how to improve inclusivity or if someone or something has made you feel uneasy.

Diversity in journalism is vital, as we have seen from issues that have surfaced over the last few months over police killings and the mass protests in American cities and towns. I expect you to engage in storytelling that is fair, complete and based on information gathered from diverse sources. That means conducting interviews that may feel uncomfortable or daunting even. But that is a fundamental objective of this class and I hope you will lean on me and your classmates to help you navigate the reporting process.

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 to diversity in your reporting.

Reporting for narrative usually means doing it all in person. But that is not possible in the time of COVID. We will discuss best practices for how to get the information you need without being able to engage in immersive reporting.

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 transparency.

I cannot stress this enough: **Plagiarism, fabrication and conflicts of interest will not be tolerated, and you will FAIL the class and lose credibility** as a journalist.

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 without divulging those connections. 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, **meeting deadlines is mandatory** as it will be in this class. Deadlines will be clearly noted in Canvas, usually 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. Please submit your assignments as Microsoft Word files through Canvas. Do not send me links to One Drive or Google Drive. The name of each file should begin with your last name and contain the name of the assignment. Example: SmithScene1.

ATTENDANCE, PARTICIPATION AND PROFESSIONALISM

This is **not a lecture** class but a writing workshop. My hope is that you will learn much from our in-class writing and discussions. We are a small class that meets once a week. As such, your attendance is mandatory. I expect you to log into Zoom on time, turn your video on and look and behave in a manner that is professional and respectful to me and your fellow students. Please consider your wardrobe and hygiene just as you would if we all in the same room, as well as your audio and visual backgrounds. (That means that you do not log into Zoom sitting in bed with your pajamas on.) I encourage you to use virtual backgrounds for Zoom if you want to protect the privacy of your environment or surroundings. If you go to black screen for a significant amount of time, you will lose points for participation. All classes will be recorded for educational purposes. If you have extenuating circumstances or concerns about Zoom attendance and privacy, please let me know. Let's discuss Zoom protocol on our first day of class.

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. Your insights and comments should be respectful to all.

Writers learn from one another, so you are expected to come to class each week 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.

COMMUNICATION

Journalists are in the business of communication and you **must communicate** with me in this class. **You must check your UF email and Canvas** regularly for discussions and announcements. I encourage you to download the Canvas app on your phone. If you are having problems with your assignments, you must email me immediately and not wait until class to discuss them. Good communication is extremely important, especially during the pandemic when we will not be able to meet in person.

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

Writing assignments: 200 points

Reading response to book: 100 points

Class participation: 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)
- *One Day* by Gene Weingarten (available on Amazon)
- Assigned feature stories and podcasts

SUPPLIES

- You will need notebooks and a recording device, if your phone does not have a voice recorder. Of course, you will need good connectivity for Zoom. If you connect with your phone, please make sure you have your laptop with you for class assignments. Please let me know if you are having wi-fi woes.
- You will also need to create an account on [Medium.com](https://medium.com), if you don't have one already. It's fast and free to sign up.
- And you may need a few strong cups of coffee. I know I will!

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

If you are an intrepid reporter, you will have Googled me by now. I began my career as a journalist in Tallahassee (home of that “other” university) and have been reporting and editing now for 37 years. I covered presidential elections, hurricanes, earthquakes and 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 series of stories on an Army chaplain at war. I’m not a superhero but I was featured in Marvel Comics’ “Civil War” series. Most recently, I was a senior writer at CNN. I began teaching at UF in 2018 and earlier this year, I was named the university’s Undergraduate Teacher of the Year. I also teach in a low-residency MFA program in narrative media at the University of Georgia.

Most students at UF know me as Prof B. Those who have taken my class will tell you that 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.

You can find me on:

www. monibasus.com

Twitter: @TheMoniBasu

Instagram: @evilreporterchick

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

(I’m not doing the **TikTok thing**, though I have an account to see what you are up to.)

COURSE EVALUATIONS

I encourage you to fill out the evaluation for this class online via GatorEvals at the end of the semester. You will be notified when the evaluation period opens. I take student evaluations seriously and try to improve the class based on your comments. Please be respectful with your comments.

Summaries of course evaluation results are available to students at <https://gatorevals.ua.ufl.edu/public-results/>

SCHEDULE

Please bear in mind that this is the first semester I am teaching this class fully online. I have tried my best to make adjustments, but I ask for your patience and understanding if there are any hiccups as we move forward. Some reading assignments are listed below; others will be assigned later as the semester progresses. All assigned readings should be completed by the start of class and assignments on their

designated due dates. What follows is **AN ESTIMATION** of how we will proceed this semester and it is **subject to change** depending on guest speakers and other needs of the class.

Week 1, September 1

Personal Introductions: The Real You.

Discussion: What is narrative? Course syllabus.

Reading assignment:

- Story and theme. Introduction, Chapters 1 and 9, *Storycraft*
- Introduction, The Day and Chapter 1, *One Day*

Week 2, September 8

What is the story really about? Thinking like a storyteller. Generating strong ideas.

Reading assignment:

- Point of view, voice and style. Chapters 3 and 4, *Storycraft*
- Chapter 2, *One Day*

Week 3, September 15

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

Discussion: Your story ideas.

Reading assignment:

- Developing a character. Chapter 5, *Storycraft*
- Chapters 3 and 4, *One Day*

Week 4, September 22

Reporting for Narrative: Getting access and ethical dilemmas.

Reading assignment:

- Reporting and ethics. Chapters 10 and 14, *Storycraft*
- Chapters 5 and 6, *One Day*
- “A Survivor’s Life” by Eli Saslow, Washington Post.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2015/12/05/after-a-mass-shooting-a-survivors-life/>

Week 5, September 29

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*
- Chapters 7 and 8, *One Day*

Week 6, October 6

How to grab a reader’s attention. Writing great ledes but not giving it all away.

Reading assignment:

- Narratives. Chapters 11, 12, 13, *Storycraft*
- Chapters 9 and 10, *One Day*
- TBD story by next week's guest speaker, Lane DeGregory

Week 7, October 13

Guest speaker: Pulitzer Prize winner Lane DeGregory

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

Reading assignment:

- Action. Chapter 7, *Storycraft*
- Chapters 11 and 12, *One Day*

Week 8, October 20

Open class discussion.

Reading assignment:

- Chapters 13 and 14, *One Day*
- “30 Years Ago, Romania Deprived Thousands of Babies of Human Contact. Here’s What’s Become Of Them” by Melissa Faye Greene, *The Atlantic*.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/07/can-an-unloved-child-learn-to-love/612253/>

Week 9, October 27

Guest speaker. Melissa Faye Greene

Reading assignment:

- Chapters 15, 16 and 17 *One Day*

Week 10, November 3

Organizing your story. Structure and the narrative arc.

Due: Story pitch and second scene from your story

Reading assignment:

- Structure. Chapter 2, *Storycraft*
- Chapters 18 and 19, *One Day*
- “Clinging to life – and whatever floats” by Mark Larabee, *The Oregonian*:
<https://press.uchicago.edu/books/hart/Larabee.html>

Week 11, November 10

Due: 700-word narrative response to *One Day*. To be shared with everyone in Canvas.

Reading assignment:

- Ethics. Chapter 14, *Storycraft*

Week 12, November 17

Guest speaker: Gene Weingarten

Self-editing and rewriting.

Discussion: *One Day* and your narrative responses

Due: First draft of story

Week 13, November 24

Thanksgiving week. No class. Eat turkey or tofurkey but keep reporting and writing.

Week 14, December 1

No class. We will use this week for individual story conferences.

Week 15, December 8

How to get published.

Due, December 11: Final draft of your story.

Week 16, December 15

Last class. No final exam. Open discussion.