

JOU 4311/MMC 6936: NARRATIVE NONFICTION

Instructor: **Moni Basu (Prof B)**
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Office hours: **Wednesdays, 9 a.m. to 11 a.m.**
and by appointment on **Zoom**

Need to talk about class? Anything that is bugging you? I will make myself available during office hours or by phone or Zoom to meet with you. Please email me on your UF account. I will try my best to respond within 24 hours.

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“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”

-- Maya Angelou

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 Narrative Nonfiction! 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.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

This course is about the art of storytelling.

We will discuss how to report and write stories that hold a reader’s attention for more than a few paragraphs. We'll explore ways to make people sit up and pay attention, so much so that they can't put your story down until the very last word. We will study 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 vivid characters and scenes, capture dialogue, and experiment with non-linear story structure.

You will be expected to produce engaging, accurate, high-quality work that is worthy of publication. Writer Margaret Atwood put it this way: “A word after a word after a word is power.” It's a simple concept that is hard 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.

The bar is set very high in this class. You will be expected to produce a longform narrative. You should strive to see your story published in a magazine, newspaper or online publication.

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 I don't mean reading that puts you to sleep at night, You will be reading stories produced by great narrative writers like Eli Saslow, Jennifer Senior and Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah. You will be reading those stories analytically, with pen in hand. And you will be speaking a LOT. Our class time together will be a combination of lectures, discussion, peer reviews, and writing activities.

Please don't take this class unless you are passionate about reporting, writing and rewriting. Please don't take it if you have a full load of classes or if the bulk of your energy will be spent elsewhere. And please don't take this course unless you have ideas and are open to brainstorming those in class.

Here are a few things we will focus on during our semester together:

- 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

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

There are no textbooks for this class but you will be required to read two books that are available on Bookshop.org, Amazon and other online sellers:

***StoryCraft* by Jack Hart** (please buy the new edition that just came out earlier this year)

***Hiroshima* by John Hersey**

I highly recommend you order and begin reading both books as soon as you can.

Other readings, mostly from magazines and online publications, will be posted on Canvas on a weekly basis. You can never be a great writer unless you read, read, and read some more.

Prerequisites

You must have taken Magazine and Feature Writing and received a B or higher to be enrolled in this class. Other courses that are beneficial include Investigative Reporting and Multimedia Reporting. You must have **strong reporting and writing skills** in order to succeed.

Minimum technology requirements

The University of Florida expects students to acquire computer hardware and software appropriate to their degree program. For this class, you must have Zoom capability, a smartphone or a recording device, and Microsoft Word. You will be required to download the Canvas app on your phone and turn on notifications.

COURSE POLICIES

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 may not always be 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 spelling, 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. You are encouraged to be self-directed and take responsibility for your learning. We meet once a week. As such, your attendance is mandatory.

catalog.ufl.edu/UGRD/academic-regulations/attendance-policies/

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.

You will also be expected to post comments on the Canvas discussion board for this class. 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 50 points of your final grade. You will lose 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.

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. I am here to help you but cannot unless you let me know.

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 police killings and 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.

GRADING

I will make every effort to have each assignment graded and posted in a timely manner.

Assignments:

Long-form story: 500 points

Here is the breakdown for the 500 points:
First draft (including story pitch): 200 points
Final draft: 300 points

Writing assignments: 200 points (each assignment is 50 points)

Assignment 1: Write a narrative of a day that was especially difficult during the pandemic.

Assignment 2: Write a memoir of someone you know and bring them to life for your readers.

Assignment 3: Go sit somewhere unfamiliar for 30 minutes. Observe. Then write a story. Use all five senses.

Assignment 4: Write a scene from your reported story. Peer review and then rewrite.

Reading response to *Hiroshima*: 100 points

Class participation and Canvas discussions: 200 points

***Note to graduate students:** You will have an extra writing assignment that will count toward your grade and will be determined as we progress.

Grading Scale

Letter Grade	% Equivalency	GPA Equivalency
A	93-100%	4.0
A-	90 – 92%	3.67
B+	87 – 89%	3.33
B	83 – 86%	3.00
B-	80 – 82%	2.67
C+	77 – 79%	2.33
C	73 – 76%	2.00
C-	70 – 72%	1.67
D+	67 – 69%	1.33
D	63 – 66%	1.00
D-	60 – 62%	.67
E, I, NG, S-U, WF	0 – 59%	0.00

See the [current UF grading policies](#) for more information.

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 38 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 in 2020, 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.)

UF POLICIES

University Policy on Accommodating Students with Disabilities

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

University Policy on Academic Conduct

UF students are bound by The Honor Pledge which states, "We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honesty and integrity by abiding by the Honor Code. On all work submitted for credit by students at the University of Florida, the following pledge is either required or implied: "On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment." The Honor Code (<http://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/process/student-conduct-honor-code/>) specifies a number of behaviors that are in violation of this code and the possible sanctions. Furthermore, you are obligated to report any condition that facilitates academic misconduct to appropriate personnel. If you have any questions or concerns, please consult with the instructor or TAs in this class.

Communication Courtesy

All members of the class are expected to follow [rules of common courtesy](#) during, before and after class, in all email messages, threaded discussions, and chats.

GETTING HELP

Technical difficulties:

For issues with technical difficulties for Canvas, please contact the UF Help Desk at:

- <http://helpdesk.ufl.edu>
- (352) 392-HELP (4357)
- Walk-in: HUB 132

Any requests for make-ups due to technical issues should be accompanied by the ticket number received from the Help Desk when the problem was reported to them. The ticket number will document the time and date of the problem. You should e-mail your instructor within 24 hours of the technical difficulty if you wish to request a make-up.

Health and wellness

- **U Matter, We Care:** If you or someone you know is in distress, please contact umatter@ufl.edu, 352-392-1575, or visit umatter.ufl.edu to refer or report a concern and a team member will reach out to the student in distress.
- **Counseling and Wellness Center:** Visit counseling.ufl.edu or call 352-392-1575 for information on crisis services as well as non-crisis services.
- **Student Health Care Center:** Call 352-392-1161 for 24/7 information to help you find the care you need, or visit shcc.ufl.edu.
- **University Police Department:** Visit police.ufl.edu or call 352-392-1111 (or 9-1-1 for emergencies).
- **UF Health Shands Emergency Room/Trauma Center:** For immediate medical care in Gainesville, call 352-733-0111 or go to the emergency room at 1515 SW Archer Road, Gainesville, FL 32608; ufhealth.org/emergency-room-trauma-center.

Academic and student support

- **Career Connections Center:** 352-392-1601. Career assistance and counseling services career.ufl.edu/.
- **Library Support:** Various ways to receive assistance with respect to using the libraries or finding resources. cms.uflib.ufl.edu/ask
- **Teaching Center:** 352-392-2010 General study skills and tutoring: teachingcenter.ufl.edu/
- **Writing Studio:** 352-846-1138. Help brainstorming, formatting, and writing papers: writing.ufl.edu/writing-studio/

COURSE EVALUATIONS

Students are expected to provide professional and respectful feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing course evaluations online via GatorEvals. Guidance on how to give feedback in a professional and respectful manner is available at <https://gatorevals.aa.ufl.edu/students/>. Students will be notified when the evaluation period opens, and can complete evaluations through the email they receive from GatorEvals, in their Canvas course menu under GatorEvals, or via <https://ufl.bluera.com/ufl/>. Summaries of course evaluation results are available to students at <https://gatorevals.aa.ufl.edu/public-results/>.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Here are some tips that will help you get the most of this course while taking full advantage of this format:

- Schedule "class times" for yourself. It is important to do the coursework on time each week. Schedule writing time for yourself when you can be relaxed and feeling "zen." You will receive a reduction in points for work that is turned in late!
- Read ALL of the material contained on this site. There is a lot of helpful information that can save you time and help you meet the objectives of the course.
- Print out the Course Schedule located in the Course Syllabus and check things off as you go.
- Ask for help or clarification of the material if you need it.
- Do not wait to ask questions! Waiting to ask a question might cause you to miss a due date.
- Do your work well before the due dates. Sometimes things happen. If your computer goes down when you are trying to submit an assignment, you'll need time to troubleshoot the problem.
- To be extra safe, back up your work to an external hard drive, thumb drive, or through a cloud service.

PRIVACY AND ACCESSIBILITY

For information about the privacy policies of the tools used in this course, see the links below:

- Instructure (Canvas)
 - [Privacy Policy](#)
 - [Accessibility](#)
- Zoom
 - [Privacy Policy](#)
 - [Accessibility](#)
- YouTube (Google)
 - [Privacy Policy](#)
 - [Accessibility](#)
- Microsoft
 - [Privacy Policy](#)
 - [Accessibility](#)
- Adobe
 - [Privacy Policy](#)
 - [Accessibility](#)

COVID-RELATED PRACTICES

In response to COVID-19, the following policies and requirements are in place to maintain your learning environment and to enhance the safety of our in-classroom interactions.

- Face masks are “recommended” in Weimer Hall.
- If you are experiencing COVID-19 symptoms ([guidance from the CDC on symptoms of coronavirus](#)), please use the UF Health screening system and follow the instructions on whether you are able to attend class. Find more information in the [UF Health guidance on what to do if you have been exposed to or are experiencing Covid-19 symptoms](#). Do NOT come to class if you test positive.

SCHEDULE

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. There will additional readings assigned as we progress and they will be announced in class as well as on Canvas.

Week 1, August 24

Personal Introductions: The Real You.
Discussion of syllabus.
The power of stories.

Week 2, August 31

What is narrative? The difference between a feature story and a narrative.

Week 3, September 7

Thinking like a storyteller. Generating strong ideas.

Due: Writing prompt 1: Write a narrative of a day that was especially difficult during the pandemic.

Week 4, September 14

Reporting for narrative: Access, trust, immersion.

Week 5, September 21

No class today. I will be out of the country.

Week 6, September 28

Immersion reporting vs. reconstruction.

Week 7, October 5

Observation and interviewing for narrative.

Due: Writing prompt 2: Write a memoir of someone you know and bring them to life for your readers.

Week 8, October 12

Organizing your story. Structure and the narrative arc

Week 9, October 19

Thinking cinematically: Developing scenes and character. Capturing dialogue.

Week 10, October 26

Guest speaker TBA

Week 11, November 2

What happens next? Foreshadowing, adding tension.

Week 12, November 9

Individual story conferences this week. No class.

Week 13, November 16:

Self-editing and rewriting.

Due: Writing prompt 4

Week 14, November 23

Thanksgiving. Eat Turkey or Tofurkey. No class.

Due: Narrative response to *Hiroshima*

Week 15, November 30

Discussion of *Hiroshima*

Week 16, December 7:

Last class. Open discussion.