

JOU 4311: Narrative Nonfiction Writing

Spring 2024 | Section NNF1 | W 9:35-12:35



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Office Hours: By appointment.*

* Since this is an online class, please let me know ahead of time when you plan to attend office hours so that I can send a link to a Google video chat. My work schedule is quite flexible, and I'm always willing to accommodate. Just email me to set something up.

Welcome to advanced storytelling

The above title could just as easily be the title of this class. If you're here, it means you know the basics; you know how to ask the right questions and string together coherent sentences, and you know about different kinds of stories and how to execute them. What you lack is polish, and that's what this class is about: excellence. This isn't a class about how to write a story, but how to perfect one — from conceptualization to detailed reporting to character-driven arcs to dazzling prose. As with all journalism, great narrative nonfiction must always be factually correct and accessible, and those facts won't change in this course. But within those (surprisingly nimble) constraints, you still have ample room to produce some of the most memorable, most fulfilling kind of work this field has to offer.

To do this, we will together explore some of the most important components of great narrative storytelling — concepts like description, dialogue and story arcs, just to name a few. Through weekly reading assignments, you will learn how masters of this craft deploy these techniques effectively, and how you can begin to do so, too. Success will require three main traits, aside from the many already endemic to students at this great university. They are:

- 1) **Curiosity.** The best ideas, in terms of stories and how to tell them, come from looking into the world (often, as a form of habit) and asking what, who, how and — especially — why.
- 2) **Determination.** Feature writing often gets a bad rep as the unimportant cousin of hard news/investigative reporting. It's often the first department cut at struggling newspapers, the

first casualty of the attention economy. But to be great at it requires as much hard work as those other “important” fields, if not more. It takes a willingness to call sources three or four times to get every necessary detail, and the humility to accept criticism throughout the revision process. If this starts to feel burdensome, that probably means you’re doing a good job (although please don’t be shy about reaching out if your workload from this class becomes *over*burdensome, either).

- 3) **Participation.** I was a college student myself, and not too long ago at that. Therefore, I know this class will not be your first priority, and I don’t expect it to be; I know that “life happens,” and things will come up that make completing reading assignments impossible or story submissions late. I accept all of that. But what I ask in return is simply that absent any of those complications, you stay engaged — with the reading, with the lectures, with the guest speakers and, certainly, with the reporting/writing process. This course, after all, is for your benefit. You’re here, presumably, because you want to be. And the more you participate, the more you will carry away with you.

Now then, with my introductory diatribe finished, let’s talk specifics.

Course Objectives

This class will combine guest speakers, readings, intense discussions and one long writing assignment, all geared toward teaching you to tell rich, emotional, nuanced stories. The course is designed to force you to habitually read, write and *think* about the stories you want to tell and how you want to tell them.

Here’s a sampling of some ideas/topics we’ll discuss:

- Story generation
- Pitching
- Knowing your audience
- Description
- Dialogue
- Discerning details
- Voice

- Interviewing/listening

Prerequisites

Magazine and Feature Writing (JOU 4308) or instructor approval. I welcome anyone who can demonstrate existing writing/reporting competency, but as I said above, you do need to already know the basics.

Minimum technology requirements

The University of Florida expects students to acquire appropriate computer hardware and software. For this class, you must have video chat capability, a smartphone or a recording device, and access to Google Docs and/or Microsoft Word.

Readings

You have two required textbooks for this class, both of which should be inexpensive and easy to acquire: “Leave Out the Tragic Parts,” by Dave Kindred; and “Behind the Beautiful Forevers,” by Katherine Boo. I will send out chapter assignments on a weekly basis, along with two other stories — one chosen by me, and one chosen by one of you. I’ll warn you ahead of time that my background is in sports journalism, so your reading assignments will likely skew toward that bias simply because it’s the world I know. That said, even if you hate sports, these stories are chosen for general-interest readers and will only tangentially be related to sports. As for the student-chosen stories, in addition to picking one, you’ll also be responsible for leading a discussion about it.

Assignments/Grading breakdown

Feature pitch: 100 points

First draft: 200 points.

Second draft: (1,500-4,000+ words): 200 points

Third draft: 300 points

Participation: 200 points

Assignments in-depth

| Assignment | Due Date(s) | Description | Points | % of Course Grade |
|-------------------|--------------------|--|---------------|--------------------------|
| Feature pitch | Jan. 31 | A formal pitch for your final project, which is what you'll spend the entire semester working on | 100 points | 10% |
| First draft | Feb. 28 | Your first stab at a feature story, which should land somewhere between 1,500-4,000 words unless you have explicit permission saying otherwise | 200 points | 20% |
| Second draft | March 27 | A revised version of your first draft, based on conceptual edits | 200 points | 20% |
| Third draft | April 24 | A revised, polished version of your second draft, based on conceptual and line edits | 300 points | 30% |
| Participation | All the time | This grade will be based on your engagement during in-class discussions. If you want to make it easy on yourself, I suggest you raise your hand early and often. Those who don't will also get a chance to impact this grade when I randomly call on them. Half of this will also be determined by your discussion leadership. | 200 points | 20% |

Class policies of note

On plagiarism and professionalism: Like in every other class at the J-School, plagiarism will not be tolerated. There are, in fact, very few things that I will not tolerate to some degree, but this is one of them, so let me be perfectly clear: If you are caught plagiarizing (stealing someone’s work or ideas, verbatim or not, without attribution), fabricating (making up people, quotes, anecdotes, etc.), or engaging in conflicts of interest (using as sources your parents/roommates/people to whom you have some personal connection in a non-personal story), then **you will receive an automatic failing grade**, no question about it. I know the pressures of college/young adulthood may tempt you to take an easy way out; I saw it plenty during my time as a student. But it simply is not worth it. If you’re struggling, just talk to me and we’ll work something out. No amount of pressure is worth engaging in these practices; especially not when I’m offering you an alternative escape hatch.

Additionally, you are expected to be accurate, and your prose should be in accordance with the most up-to-date AP Stylebook. I will not be rigorously fact-checking every story you submit, but you will lose points for obvious errors. And I am not going to deduct a specified number of points for spelling/grammar errors (though I will point them out), but an accumulation that suggests carelessness will affect your grade. I will hand out rubrics with each assignment that offer specifics on what qualifies as “an accumulation,” how many points you’ll lose for fact errors, etc.

On deadlines: This industry doesn’t tolerate lateness, and I won’t tolerate patterns of tardiness in this class. Submit your assignments on time. If you need an extension for whatever reason, I’m happy to consider it if you come talk to me; I’ve often found that as important as deadlines are in our industry, learning to negotiate them is also a valuable skill. However, if you turn in an assignment late without consulting me at least 24 hours before it’s due, you will lose one letter grade for each day it’s late.

On diversity and inclusion: At its best, our industry thrives when diverse viewpoints, backgrounds and experiences are represented consistently and thoroughly across publications. Conversely, one of our industry’s greatest threats to credibility is presented by being clueless, misguided or out of touch with the people we write about. For that reason, prioritizing diversity is vital both in terms of your reporting, and in terms of the parameters of this class.

The key word here is empathy, meaning, at its most basic, “understanding another.” This sounds simple on its face, but it often means delving into contexts and communities you’ve never encountered. We’ll discuss how to do that effectively over the course of the semester, but for now, just keep in mind that you’ll be expected to incorporate diverse, relevant sourcing into your reporting. Our job as reporters is somewhat unique in that we’re not only a reflection of society, but we *present* that

reflection back to society, and it ought to be as thorough and as accurate as possible. This becomes impossible if we ignore important cultural context and relevant voices. In order to be fair, we must be empathetic, and we must be thorough. That's the way it should be — and also the way that makes the work most fun and rewarding. As retired sportswriter Gary Smith once said, "Judgment just closes off so many possibilities and doors and windows. So, the more you open to what created the human in any given moment, the richer the terrain you as a writer have to explore. It's in the ambiguities, the paradoxes of human beings, where truth lies."

As far as this class goes, I fervently believe that our differences — be they race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, age, religion, nationality, disability, or culture — make us better reporters and better human beings. Our differences make us who we are, and by embracing our own unique backgrounds while also recognizing and trying to understand the unique experiences of others, as reporters, we're able to better serve the communities we cover. The same applies to our relationships in this class. We're all better off when we work hard to understand each others' viewpoints, and I expect that you will do so throughout our time together. I, in turn, will strive to do the same. I've tried to incorporate a range of voices and experiences into our reading selections, and by giving each of you the chance to choose one story for us to read, I've empowered you to do so as well. That said, my selections/inclination toward this end will likely be imperfect, which is why I've chosen to borrow the following guidelines from the syllabus of my former professor, Dr. Norm Lewis:

- 1) Please let me know if you find any material in the course violates the College's (and my own) expectation of fostering understanding of diverse peoples and cultures, and how our role as reporters impacts that understanding in others.
- 2) Please alert me if you have a name or preferred pronouns that differ from the class roll information, which is my only source of information about you.
- 3) If you have any concerns involving diversity in this course that you feel uncomfortable discussing with me, I encourage you to contact Professor Joanna Hernandez, CJC director of inclusion and diversity, at jhernandez@jou.ufl.edu.

The AI addendum: Great writers are great because they figure out how to say things in new ways; generative AI, by its very nature, will not allow you to do that. Therefore, using ChatGPT and other generative AI programs to write your papers for you will be considered cheating and, if caught, will result in the same consequences as plagiarism. That said, you're welcome to use these programs to help

you think through ideas, iterate through titles, etc. — in fact, we'll talk about productive AI use in class.

The on-camera addendum: Students will be required to have their cameras on and show their faces during class to encourage engagement with the material. Sorry for any potential inconvenience, but I've had trouble with students taking advantage of my no-camera-needed policy in the past.

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.ua.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.ua.ufl.edu/publicresults/>.

About me

I'm 27 years old. I'm originally from Miami, Florida, and these days I'm living in scenic Provo, Utah, with my wife, our border collie and a pair of temperamental cats. I graduated from UF in 2018. I worked at the Alligator starting in the second semester of freshman year, first as a copy editor, then covering cross country, women's basketball, football, baseball, football again and baseball again, along with a few men's basketball games and columns thrown in. I was the assistant sports editor for three semesters and the main sports editor for one, back when the paper was still a five-days-a-week operation. I have the Alligator 'a' tattooed on my arm, as you've perhaps already noticed. During my time in Gainesville, I also freelanced for the Associated Press and was a Gators correspondent for the Tampa Bay Times. I interned at the Miami Herald after junior year and at the Los Angeles Times after senior year, before acquiring a 10-month Master's from the Columbia Journalism School in Manhattan. I came to Deseret as an intern in June 2019 and have been here since, working mostly on the in-house magazine we launched in January 2021.

My focus at every place I've been, on every beat, has been feature storytelling — through narratives. Through profiles. Through 300-word slices of life. I'm far from an expert, but I'm really, really excited to pass on what little I have learned to y'all. In that vein, I pride myself on being available, because I've found that the best teachers/editors I've had have done that for me. So if you ever need help with anything class-related, career-related or, really, with anything at all, my digital door is always open.

Two other quick personal things worth noting: First, my parents just moved to Gainesville in September, so I'll likely be in town a few times, and I'll likely try to host class in person when that's the case. Given that this is a fully online class, you will still have the option to attend via Zoom, but I think it'll be helpful to interact face-to-face a few times, if possible.

Also, please, *please* do not call me "Professor Bauer," "Mr. Bauer," or any other courtesy title thereof. I'm already elbow-deep in a quarter-life crisis, and I don't think I can handle such an adult title. So please, just call me "Ethan." If that feels weird, then I will begrudgingly allow "Professor" or "Prof."

Tentative class calendar

Note that the following topics and readings are subject to change at the instructor's discretion. I'll send emails with reading information every Thursday, and if it doesn't match the readings on the syllabus, go with the ones in the email; I'd like to keep the readings flexible enough to pepper in the occasional timely piece, as well as potentially lighten the load if these prove to be too much. Plus sometimes I'll assign only one section of a listed story, or make a story optional, etc. Similarly, I might need to rearrange discussion topics to accommodate guest speakers. This calendar is meant to provide a **rough idea** of how the class will proceed, and I reserve the right to change it up as needed.

| Week | Date(s) | Topic/Assignments | Readings |
|------|---------|--|--|
| 1 | Jan. 10 | Syllabus day | "Leave Out the Tragic Parts," chapters ##-##; "The Kentucky Derby is decadent and depraved," by Hunter S. Thompson |
| 2 | Jan. 17 | Narrative journalism history | "Leave Out the Tragic Parts," chapters ##-##; "The Juice Man," by Jesse Hyde |
| 3 | Jan. 24 | Pitching/story selection | "Leave Out the Tragic Parts," chapters ##-##; "The Most Surveilled Place in America," by Gaby del Valle |
| 4 | Jan. 31 | Feature reporting. Feature pitch due | "Leave Out the Tragic Parts," chapters ##-##; "Snowfall," by John Branch |
| 5 | Feb. 7 | Feature interviewing | "Leave Out the Tragic Parts," chapters ##-##; "Telling JJ," by John Woodrow |

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| 6 | Feb. 14 | Dialogue | “Leave Out the Tragic Parts,” chapters ##-##; “The Prodigal Mother,” by Alexandra Rain |
| 7 | Feb. 21 | Ledes and nut grafs | “Leave Out the Tragic Parts,” chapters ##-##; “The Falling Man,” by Tom Junod |
| 8 | Feb. 28 | Description. First draft due | “Behind the Beautiful Forever,” chapters ##-##; “Rapture of the Deep,” by Gary Smith |
| 9 | March 6 | Suspense | “Behind the Beautiful Forever,” chapters ##-##; “Baseball, barbecue, and losing freedom this July Fourth,” by Howard Bryant; “I don’t want to be an internet person,” by Ginevra Lily Davis |
| 10 | March 13 | SPRING BREAK; NO CLASS | N/A |
| 11 | March 20 | First-person narrative | “Behind the Beautiful Forever,” chapters ##-##; “Freedom, just north of hope,” by Natalia Galicza; “A most American terrorist: The making of Dylann Roof” |
| 12 | March 27 | Writing for a specific audience. Second draft due | “Behind the Beautiful Forever,” chapters ##-##; “The white flight of Derek Black,” by Eli Saslow; “You can’t quit cold turkey,” by Tommy Tomlinson |
| 13 | April 3 | Empathy | “Behind the Beautiful Forever,” chapters ##-##; “The LaMelo Show,” by Mirin Fader; “The case of Jane Doe Ponytail,” by Dan Barry |
| 14 | April 10 | Voice | “Behind the Beautiful Forever,” chapters ##-##; “How an Ivy League school turned against a student,” by Rachel Aviv; “America’s Son,” by Tarpley Hitt |
| 15 | April 17 | Profiles | “Behind the Beautiful Forever,” chapters |

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| | | | ##-##; “Prince Vinegar’s last stand,” by Lane DeGregory; “The Great Zucchini,” by Gene Weingarten; “What Mitt Romney saw in the Senate,” by McKay Coppins; “The trouble with shaken baby syndrome,” by James Ross Gardner |
| 16 | April 24 | Potpuri; possible guest speaker. Final draft due | N/A |
| 17 | Finals week | N/A | |

Final draft grading guidelines

This is **not** meant to be a checklist. It’s perfectly possible to get an A on your final paper without doing everything on this list. This is only meant to provide you with some guidance about what different letter grades **tend** to look like in this class; there can certainly be exceptions. That said, I will use these guidelines as a sort of baseline when grading, so they’re worth paying attention to and keeping in mind as you conceptualize your stories

A - Extensive time spent with primary source(s); multiple interviews, usually at least seven or eight; documents from original records request(s); breaking news; reads like a story, like a novel; plentiful historical context/expertise; multiple scenes; sensory details and descriptions for all five senses

B - Some time spent with primary source(s); multiple interviews, but not quite enough to tell the full story; well-organized in terms of sections, chronology, etc; doesn’t read like a news report; some historical context/expertise; at least one scene; sensory details and descriptions for more than one of the five senses

C - More than on interview; uses the interview itself as a scene; adequately organized in terms of having a lede, nut graf and conclusion; reads like a more standard news report; one/no sensory descriptions

D - One/no interview; no scenes; little organization; no context as to why the story matters; reads like an advertisement

F - You'd have to try pretty darn hard to get here, so somewhat ironically, this is reserved for no effort whatsoever. You didn't do any reporting, slapped something together at the last possible second and hoped it would get you enough points to pass the class, because at least that's better than getting a zero. Perhaps it will be, but you will still get an F on the assignment