



**Magazine & Feature Writing  
with Cynthia Barnett  
JOU 4308  
Spring 2024**

**Mondays 12:50 to 1:40 p.m. Weimer 2056  
Wednesdays 12:50 to 2:45 p.m. Weimer 1090**

**Cynthia's contact & office hours**

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**Office Hours for Students:** Walk-in @ 3063: Mondays 2-4:30 p.m. and Wednesdays 3-4:30 p.m.  
By appointment: Phone; Zoom; or Walk & Talk in Florida Park neighborhood.

**Feature Writing, the craft:** Features are compelling nonfiction articles that dive deeply into human-interest storytelling, trending news topics, personality profiles or place-based narratives, to name just a few of the possibilities. They allow more creativity and color than traditional newswriting, relying on sharp observation, vivid detail and narrative devices such as scene-setting. Feature stories are often mischaracterized as “soft,” when in fact they represent some of the most powerful journalism in the profession on social and other issues.

**Feature Writing, the course:** You'll analyze classic and recent examples of great features to absorb the reporting and writing practices that lead to unforgettable stories. You'll sharpen your skills for reporting in depth and writing with clarity. You'll learn new tools like setting scenes and building suspense—all girded by a strong foundation of journalistic ethics and empathy.

This course is hands-on. While you'll learn from me, and from professional writers and editors who will share their wisdom and experience, most of our time together will focus on class discussion and workshopping. After you gain some experience writing two shorter features—a reported first-person essay and a place-based story—we'll write, peer-edit and rewrite two magazine-style features: a profile built around your subject's work, and a general feature that illuminates a current news or social topic. Please note Week 7 and Week 13 are devoted to workshopping/peer editing.



**CLASS OUTCOMES**

This course will help you:

- Understand the elements and structure behind unforgettable feature writing.
- Build a vocabulary for the craft and use it to critique your own writing; that of your peers; and the most talked-about magazine and feature writing of the day.
- Learn where and how to find compelling features.
- Deepen your reporting, interviewing and research skills.
- Become a clear, concise, original, engaging feature writer.
- Identify your audiences and craft pitches to a variety of outlets—with a goal of publication.



## READINGS, PARTICIPATION & GRADES:

**READINGS:** You cannot become a better writer without reading lots of exceptional writing. To succeed in this course, you must devote time each week to analyzing the assigned readings. Read (or view/listen to) them before Monday's class. Each student should also choose a magazine or website to read this semester. Possibilities include: *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times* magazine, *The New Republic*, *Outside*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Vanity Fair*, or another you choose. Later in the semester, you'll assign a favorite feature to the rest of us and present on your magazine.

**PARTICIPATION:** Being present and engaged, working through our in-class writing prompts, editing your peers and offering them feedback on story ideas is part of your grade. Class time will consist of discussion, with each other and some terrific guest speakers, and workshopping. You are expected to keep up with the readings and assignments, come to class prepared and participate: Share your insights and ideas, ask questions, critique with honesty and empathy, challenge with respect.

## ASSIGNMENTS, POINTS POSSIBLE AND GRADES: (Detailed instructions for each in the "Assignments" section of Canvas.)

- Attendance and Engagement: **100** (Roll call, engagement with the weekly assignments and participation in in-class writing prompts and story-idea sessions.)
- Reported first-person essay: **100** (500-800 words due Weds Jan 17<sup>th</sup> @ midnight)
- Profile pitch: **50** (300-500 words due Weds Jan. 31<sup>st</sup> @ midnight)
- Profile first draft: **100** (1,200-1,800 words due Weds Feb. 14<sup>th</sup> @ midnight)
- Profile peer edits: **50** (you'll be graded on your thoughtful edits and in-class feedback on a classmate's profile during Week 7—the week of Feb. 19<sup>th</sup>)
- Place-based feature: **100** (500-800 words due Weds Feb. 28<sup>th</sup> @ midnight)
- Profile final draft: **100** (1,200-1,800 words due Weds March 6<sup>th</sup> @ midnight)
- Magazine presentation: **100** (A presentation on your magazine, scheduled after break)
- General feature pitch: **50** (300-500 words due Weds March 20<sup>th</sup> @ midnight)
- General feature first draft: **100** (1,500-2,000 words due Weds April 3<sup>rd</sup> @ midnight)
- General feature peer edits: **50** (you'll be graded on your thoughtful edits and in-class feedback of a classmate's feature during Week 13—the week of April 8<sup>th</sup>)
- General feature final draft: **100** (1,500-2,000 words due Weds April 24<sup>th</sup> @ midnight)

### **Total points possible: 1,000**

930-1,000 points: A

900-929: A-

880-899: B+

830-879: B

800-829: B-

780-799: C+

730-779: C

700-729: C-

680-699: D+

630-679: D

600-629: D-

599 or below: E



## DETAILED WEEKLY CLASS AGENDA & PREPARATION

### Week 1, January 8<sup>th</sup> Introductions, to the craft and each other, Syllabus.

**For Monday:** Inspired by Michael Twitty’s food and cultural memories, or by the clocks, barometers and other instruments of Eudora Welty’s Mississippi childhood, prepare to introduce yourself in class by way of some descriptive details about your childhood home, culture, family or place. **For Wednesday:** Be prepared to talk about the first-person narrative essay you chose to read. These in-class assignments will help spark brainstorming for your first feature: a reported first-person essay due Jan. 17<sup>th</sup>.

#### To Prepare:

- 1) Happy New Year! Read “[The Cowpea: A Recipe for Resilience](#),” by Michael W. Twitty, *Emergence Magazine*.
- 2) Read the two opening pages of Eudora Welty’s *One Writer’s Beginnings* (on Canvas).
- 3) Read this syllabus and bring any questions about the course.
- 4) For Wednesday: Choose one of the three essays that won the Society for Features Journalism “Best First-Person Narrative Essay” in 2023 and be prepared to talk about it in class on 1/10:
  - a. [As a baby, I was left on a street by . . . someone. As an adult, I tried to figure out why](#), by Théoden Janes. (First place winner in SFJ’s Division 2 for publications with circulation between 90,000 and 199,999)
  - b. [The prodigal mother: Amid the detritus of her mother’s addiction, the author finds solace in the life she lost](#), by Alexandra Rain. (First place winner in SFJ’s Division 1 for publications with circulation up to 90,000)
  - c. [Love Stories: Our Love Taught Me Anything Is Possible](#), by Janelle Harris Dixon. (Honorable mention in SFJ’s Division 3 for publications with circulation of 200,000 and up and for digital-only organizations)

### Week 2, January 17<sup>th</sup> What’s a feature story and what makes for great features?

We’re off Monday Jan. 15<sup>th</sup> for the MLK holiday. Please put in some extra time reading this week so that we can spend Wednesday with Eli Saslow’s work that won the 2023 Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing: “For evocative individual narratives about people struggling with the pandemic, homelessness, addiction and inequality that collectively form a sharply observed portrait of contemporary America.”

#### To Prepare:

- 1) “[An American education](#)” by Eli Saslow, *The Washington Post*, October 2022.
- 2) “[Anger and heartbreak on Bus No. 15](#),” by Eli Saslow, *The Washington Post*, June 2022.

- 3) [“Fixing the broken lovelies”](#) by Eli Saslow, *The Washington Post*, November 2022.
- 4) [“The moral calculations of a billionaire,”](#) by Eli Saslow, *The Washington Post*, January 2022.

### **Week 3, January 22<sup>nd</sup> Finding fresh, original ideas—and developing your angle.**

This week you’ll learn how to find a story anywhere—even on the moon—with guest speaker Charles Fishman, a *New York Times* bestselling author who has spent decades reporting on work. We’ll also explore what makes a great profile. Your pitch for your profile, which should be built around the subject’s work, is due Weds. Jan. 31<sup>st</sup>, so be thinking about and prepared to talk about who you may like to profile.

#### **To Prepare:**

- 1) “It’s an Honor,” (the Gravedigger Story) by Jimmy Breslin, *The New York Herald Tribune*, November 1963. (On Canvas)
- 2) “5,200 Days in Space,” by Charles Fishman, *The Atlantic*, Jan/Feb 2019. (On Canvas.)
- 3) “The Man Who Said No to Walmart,” by Charles Fishman, *Fast Company*, January 2006. (On Canvas.)
- 4) [“Local Characters: How to Tell the Stories You Have to Tell,”](#) by Lane DeGregory, Nieman Reports.
- 5) Everyone should prepare 2-3 questions for Charles; they could be about his career, these stories, reporting and writing, or assistance in finding your own profile subjects. Please post your questions to the Canvas discussion page by Wednesday morning so we won’t have duplicates.

### **Week 4 January 29<sup>th</sup> Reporting the feature—techniques for reporting with depth and detail.**

This week we’ll drill down into one outstanding feature to unpack the skills and techniques behind it. You’ll analyze “Captive No More” for both story and what it took to produce the story. Everyone should prepare at least three questions (so we don’t duplicate) for a Q&A session with Jennifer Berry Hawes, now covering the American South for *ProPublica*. Her story on Chris Smith won first place in last year’s Society for Features Journalism annual writing awards, where the judges called it “astonishing” and “a must read for every person in America.” The story will be published later this year in the *Best American Newspaper Narratives Journal*.

#### **To Prepare:**

- 1) [“Captive No More: One SC man’s journey to freedom after years in modern-day slavery,”](#) by Jennifer Berry Hawes, *The Post and Courier* of Charleston, SC, February 2022.
- 2) Everyone should prepare 2-3 questions for Jennifer; at least one about this story but others could be about her career, new position at ProPublica, etc. Please post your questions to the Canvas discussion page by Wednesday morning so we won’t have duplicates.

### **Week 5, February 5<sup>th</sup> Mastering the interview.**

We'll talk about how to get people talking: The art and craft of preparing for and conducting interviews that draw out vivid detail, new information and killer quotes. Wednesday, NPR master interviewer Jess Jiang of Planet Money will join in person to share interviewing and other insights.

#### **To Prepare:**

- 1) "[Planet Money Makes a T-Shirt](#)," by the Planet Money team. Read and view five chapters: Cotton, Machines, People, Money, Boxes and You.
- 2) Listen to "[Auction Fever](#)," by the Planet Money team.
- 3) "[12 basics of interviewing, listening and note-taking](#)," by Roy Peter Clark, and the spin-off "[An illustrated guide to the basics of interviewing](#)," both from the Poynter Institute.
- 4) Everyone should prepare 2-3 questions for Jess. Please post your questions to the Canvas discussion page by Wednesday morning so we won't have duplicates.

### **Week 6, February 12<sup>th</sup> Reporting on place, building observational and listening skills.**

Have you ever had an out-of-town journalist report on a place you know well, and felt frustrated that they missed the soul of the place entirely, or repeated hackneyed cliches? Every story happens in a place. It takes time and attention to detail to root your feature there and avoid the parachute journalism that can misrepresent communities. We'll devote this week to ethical, empathetic reporting on new places and cultures, and other best practices to help strengthen your place-based feature due Feb. 28<sup>th</sup>. Wednesday, the environmental journalist Meera Subramanian will join us— Valentine's Day being a great segue for talking about falling in love with strangers and new places.

#### **To Prepare:**

- 1) "[Freedom, Wyoming](#)" by Kim Cross, *The New York Times*, August, 2021.
- 2) "Making Perfume From the Rain," by Cynthia Barnett, *The Atlantic*, April 2015. (On Canvas)
- 3) "[In Georgia's Peach Orchards, Warm Winters Raise Specter of Climate Change](#)," by Meera Subramanian, Inside Climate News, August 2017.
- 4) "[United in Change](#)," by Meera Subramanian, *Orion* magazine, December 2019.
- 5) Everyone should prepare 2-3 questions for Meera. Please post your questions to the Canvas discussion page by Wednesday morning so we won't have duplicates.

### **Week 7, February 19<sup>th</sup> Workshop Week: Peer edits on profiles.**

**To Prepare:** Everyone should complete their peer edit by Monday and be prepared to offer your feedback in class. Be sure to check everything on the "Story Tune-Up" checklist on Canvas.

**Week 8, February 26<sup>th</sup> Killer ledes and strong verbs: Zhuzhing up your writing.**

This week is devoted to some of the writing skills that help keep readers on the page: Irresistible ledes and satisfying endings, active voice and action verbs, how to build suspense, proper use of dialogue and scene building.

**To Prepare:**

- 1) “The Fisherman’s Secret: A modern-day treasure hunt,” by Tara Duggan and Jason Fagone, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, November 2019.
- 2) Everyone should bring a favorite lede from the magazine you’re reading this semester and be prepared to share it with the class.

**Week 9, March 4<sup>th</sup> Pitches.**

This week is devoted to refining your ideas and developing a pitch in preparation for your general feature pitch due the week after Spring Break. On Wednesday, longtime magazine editor Jacki Levine, past president of the Florida Magazine Association and a member of the Journalism Department’s Advisory Council, will join us for an informal pitch session.

**To Prepare:** Bring your top idea for your general feature, along with a back-up in case your favorite falls through. Be prepared to discuss your story pitch and plan with your classmates, Cynthia, Jacki.

*Week of March 11<sup>th</sup>: Enjoy Spring Break!*

**Week 10, March 18<sup>th</sup> Story structure: How to construct a feature that keeps readers with you.**

Leading up to your general feature, first draft due April 3<sup>rd</sup>, we’ll go over story structures, narrative arc, keeping themes together and other organizational tips to help you build a clear, compelling, well-organized longer story.

**To Prepare:**

- 1) “[What Bobby McIlvaine Left Behind](#),” by Jennifer Senior, *The Atlantic*, September 2021. (Winner of the 2022 Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing and National Magazine Award for Feature Writing.)

**Week 11, March 25<sup>th</sup> Student-led story discussions and magazine presentations.**

**To prepare:** Read the features posted by your classmates on Canvas. (Remember to post yours at least a week before you’re scheduled to present.) Everyone should be working on your general feature; be prepared to update your progress in class this week, sharing both triumphs and any challenges we may be able to help with.

**Week 12, April 1<sup>st</sup> More student-led story discussions and magazine presentations.**

*No class Wednesday April 3<sup>rd</sup>!*  
*Cynthia will be at the Society of Environmental Journalists' annual conference in Philadelphia.*

**Week 13, April 8<sup>th</sup> Workshop Week: Peer edits on general features.**

**To Prepare:** Everyone should complete their peer edit by Monday and be prepared to offer your feedback in class. Be sure to check everything on the “Story Tune-Up” checklist on Canvas.

**Week 14, April 15<sup>th</sup> Last student-led story discussions and magazine critiques.**

**To prepare:** Read the features posted by your classmates on Canvas. (Remember to post yours at least a week before you're scheduled to present.)

**Week 15, April 22<sup>nd</sup> Pitching and publishing in national magazines and other major outlets, career goals, and feature writing class takeaways.**

**To Prepare:** Bring a professional goal that you have, either inspired by this class or a professional goal having nothing to do with features, and let's talk about tangible ways you might achieve it.



## COURSE POLICIES

**Student Health and Wellness:** Your well-being is important to me, and to everyone here at the University of Florida and our College of Journalism and Communications. The U Matter, We Care initiative is committed to creating a culture of care on our campus by encouraging everyone to look out for one another and reach out for help if anyone is in need. If you or a friend is in distress, please contact [umatter@ufl.edu](mailto:umatter@ufl.edu) so the U Matter, We Care Team can reach out to the person in distress. A nighttime/weekend crisis counselor is available by phone at 352-392-1575. The U Matter, We Care Team can help connect students to the many other helping resources available including, but not limited to, Victim Advocates, Housing staff, and the Counseling and Wellness Center. Please remember that asking for help is a sign of strength. In case of emergency, call 911.

**Students with disabilities:** All reasonable accommodations will be made. Should you need them, please register early in semester w/ the Disability Resource Center (352-392- 8565, [www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/](http://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/)) and provide appropriate documentation. Once registered, you'll receive an accommodation letter that you must present to me when requesting accommodation.

**Academic Honesty** is expected at all times. As a UF student, you've agreed to comply with the University Honor Code. Please make sure you understand the code and consequences, which are here: <https://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/process/student-conduct-honor-code/>. Any violations of this code will be reported to the Dean of Students. You must also pay special attention to journalistic ethics and issues of plagiarism and copyright, as well as ethics for using Chat GPT and other AI programs. The programs can be useful for things like brainstorming headlines—but **you may not turn in stories or parts of stories generated by AI**. We will talk about the evolving generative landscape through the semester, including the increasing use of the technology in disinformation campaigns.

**Class attendance:** Coming to class prepared and engaging in discussion, peer editing and in-class writing prompts are all crucial to your success in feature writing.

Requirements for attendance and other work fall under UF policies:

<https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/attendance.aspx>.

**Late assignments:** Meeting deadline is crucial to your future success and relationship with bosses/editors, whether in journalism or any other field. On all assignments, your grade will drop one full letter grade for each day overdue.

**Diversity & Inclusion:** The College of Journalism and Communications is committed to an intellectual community enriched and enhanced by diversity along a number of dimensions, including race, ethnicity and national origins, gender and gender identity, sexuality, class and religion. We expect each of our journalism courses 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.

Our classrooms are places where you will be treated with respect. We welcome individuals of all ages, backgrounds, beliefs, ethnicities, genders, gender identities and expressions, national origins, religious affiliations, sexual orientations, abilities—and other visible and nonvisible differences. All members of this class are expected to contribute to a respectful, welcoming and inclusive environment for every other member of the class.

**Class Sustainability Policy:** Please, no bottled water or any beverages in throw-away bottles or plastic cups. Beverages in durable, reusable containers are fine. Starting with this syllabus, I will distribute all course materials/hand-outs electronically, either through email or Canvas. All assignments should be turned in via Canvas.

**Storytelling Sources, Diversity and Conflicts of Interest:** For our class and always, please pursue storytelling that is fair, accurate and complete—and based on information gathered from a variety of diverse sources. A greater understanding of the cultural and ethnic differences in our society will enhance learning, and help students develop habits and sensitivities that will be of great value in their workplaces and communities. This emphasis on diversity of sources shall not focus just on race and ethnicity or sexual orientation, but also age, education, gender, geography, occupation, politics, religion, socioeconomics, etc.

Avoid conflicts of interest at all times. Students in this course shall not be used as sources for your assignments. The same applies to relatives, roommates, friends (from campus or back home), sorority sisters, fraternity brothers, or members of any other co-curricular or extracurricular organizations to which you belong. Interviewing UF faculty, staff, or employees may be allowed provided they and the student are not friends.

Sources must be interviewed either in person, by phone or via Zoom or other virtual platform. Email interviews are discouraged and permitted only with my permission in advance of that interview. Sometimes a source will want you to let her read a story before it's submitted or published. Do not do so. It may be appropriate – sometimes, depending on the story, even ideal – to call the source back to confirm facts or context, or, in the case of complex science, to read a sentence back to ensure you've accurately translated the science. Be wary, however, of allowing someone else to steer, censor or otherwise undermine your reporting or story approach.



Multiple sourcing is required – and “sources” means interacting with real human beings, not simply relying on organizational statements, news releases or websites. This also involves contacting as many people or obtaining as much related documentation as you can. It’s wise to interview as many sources as possible, so you have more than you need for your story.

All facts and opinions in your story must be attributed to sources. Anonymous or off-the-record material is not acceptable any more than fictional people. If there’s a compelling reason to not use a source’s full name in a story, you must run it by me before agreeing.

Assignments not abiding these sourcing, diversity and interview mandates will lose points.

**Course and instructor evaluations:** Finally, please provide feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing online evaluations at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu>. Evaluations are typically open during the last weeks of the semester; you’ll be given specific times when they are open. Summary results of these assessments are available for students at: <https://evaluations.ufl.edu/results/>

## YOUR INSTRUCTOR

Cynthia Barnett is a senior lecturer and the director of Climate and Environment Reporting Initiatives at UF’s College of Journalism and Communications. She is an award-winning environmental journalist who has reported on water and climate change around the world, and the author of four books including her most recent *The Sound of the Sea: Seashells and the fate of the Oceans*, named one of the best science books of the year by NPR’s Science Friday. She also wrote *Mirage*; *Blue Revolution*; and *Rain: A Natural and Cultural History*, longlisted for the National Book Award and a finalist for the PEN/E.O. Wilson Award for Literary Science Writing. She’s written on the environment for *National Geographic*, the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, the *Atlantic*, *Discover*, *Salon*, *Politico*, *Hakai*, *Orion* and many others. She earned her bachelor’s in journalism and master’s in environmental history, both from UF, and spent a year as a Knight-Wallace Fellow at the University of Michigan specializing in freshwater. She is also Mom to a 22-year-old and a 19-year-old and lives with her husband just north of campus in the Florida Park neighborhood, where she likes to do walk-and-talk office hours.