



Magazine & Feature Writing with Cynthia Barnett JOU 4308 Spring 2025

Mondays 12:50 to 1:40 p.m.
Wednesdays 12:50 to 2:45 p.m.
Weimer Hall 2050

Cynthia's contact & office hours

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Office Hours for Students: Walk-in @ 3063: Mondays 2-3 and Wednesdays

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 societal 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 professionals 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.



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, ASSIGNMENTS & 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 in each new week. Each student will also choose a magazine/website to read this semester. Possibilities include: *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times* magazine, *The New Republic*, *Rolling Stone*, *Outside*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Teen Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *Wired* or others. Please decide by the end of January and drop the name of your magazine into the Discussion thread on Canvas where I've asked so we don't have duplicates.

PARTICIPATION: Being present and engaged, sharing examples from your magazines, 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 workshoping. 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 & GRADES (Detailed instructions for each in Canvas "Assignments"):

- Attendance and Engagement: **100** (Roll call, engagement with the weekly assignments and participation in class including contributions from the magazine you'll read this semester.)
- Magazine presentation: **100** (Staggered, informal in-class presentations on your magazines include an assigned reading on your day. Rubric on Canvas; please turn in your notes there once you've presented.)
- Reported first-person essay: **100** (500-800 words due Sun Jan. 26th @ 8p)
- Place-based feature: **100** (500-800 words due Sun Feb. 9th @ 8p)
- Profile pitch: **50** (300-500 words due Sun Feb. 16th @ 8p)
- Profile first draft: **100** (1,200-1,800 words due Sun Feb. 23rd @ 8p)
- Profile peer edits: **50** (you'll be graded on your thoughtful edits and feedback on a classmate's profile, due Sun. March 2nd @ 8p)
- Profile final draft: **100** (1,200-1,800 words due Sun March 9th @ 8p)
- General feature pitch: **50** (300-500 words due Friday March 14th @ 8p)
- General feature first draft: **100** (1,500-2,000 words due Sun March 30th @ 8p)
- General feature peer edits: **50** (you'll be graded on your thoughtful edits and feedback on a classmate's general feature, due Sun April 6th @ 8p)
- General feature final draft: **100** (1,500-2,000 words due Weds April 23rd @ 8p)

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, Jan. 13th: Introductions, to the craft and each other.

On Monday: Introduction to the class and syllabus. On Wednesday: First-person narratives: 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 an object and/or descriptive details about your childhood home, culture, family or place. Then, be prepared to talk about the first-person narrative essay you chose to read. These in-class assignments will spark brainstorming for your first feature: a reported first-person essay due Jan. 26.

To Prepare (for Monday):

- 1) **Read** this syllabus and bring any questions about the course.

(for Wednesday):

- 2) **Read** “[The Cowpea: A Recipe for Resilience.](#)” by Michael W. Twitty, *Emergence Magazine*.
- 3) **Read** the two opening pages of Eudora Welty’s *One Writer’s Beginnings* (on Canvas).
- 4) Choose and read **one** of these essays that won the Society for Features Journalism “Best First-Person Narrative Essay” last year and be prepared to talk about it in class:
 - 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, Jan. 27th What’s a feature story and what makes for great features?

We’re off Monday Jan. 20th for Martin Luther King Day. Please put in some extra time reading this week so that we can spend Weds 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, Feb. 3rd: Reporting on place, the art of listening, avoiding parachute journalism

Have you ever had an out-of-town journalist report on someplace you know well, and felt frustrated that they missed the soul entirely, or repeated hackneyed clichés? (I think we Floridians know this feeling better than most people!) 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. 9th. **Special guest (Weds 2/5 on Zoom):** Narrative nonfiction writer Meera Subramanian.

To Prepare:

- 1) **Bring:** your place-based story ideas to share with the class Monday, and any challenges/triumphs.
- 2) **Read:** "[Freedom, Wyoming](#)" by Kim Cross, *The New York Times*, August, 2021.
- 3) **Read:** "Making Perfume from the Rain," by Cynthia Barnett, *The Atlantic*, April 2015. (On Canvas)
- 4) **Read:** "[In Georgia's Peach Orchards, Warm Winters Raise Specter of Climate Change](#)," by Meera Subramanian, Inside Climate News, August 2017.
- 5) **Read:** "[United in Change](#)," by Meera Subramanian, *Orion* magazine, December 2019.

Week 4, Feb. 10th Introduction to profiles

This week we'll meet narrative journalism master Eli Saslow to learn how he connects with profile subjects to uncover the details and defining moments that make his stories both intimate and expansive in capturing the issues of our times. We'll also talk nuts and bolts for finding, reporting and writing your own profiles to help strengthen your pitch on a subject and their work due 2/16.

Special guest (Weds 2/12 on Zoom): *New York Times* feature writer Eli Saslow. @elisaslow.

To Prepare:

- 1) **Bring:** your profile ideas to share with the class Monday, and any challenges/triumphs.
- 2) **Read:** "It's an Honor," (the Gravedigger Story) by Jimmy Breslin, *The New York Herald Tribune*, November 1963. (On Canvas).
- 3) **Read:** "[The Alienation of Jaime Cachua](#)," by Eli Saslow, *The New York Times*, Dec. 15th 2024.
- 4) **Read:** "[A Republican Election Clerk vs. Trump Die-Hards in a World of Lies](#)," by Eli Saslow, *The New York Times*, June 6th 2024.

Week 5, Feb. 17th: Finding fresh, original ideas—and new angles on classic stories

This week we'll learn how to find a fresh story anywhere—in hurricane rubble where 100 other reporters are roaming around, or in some rural communities in Georgia where you're the only one. 2023 CJC grad Lucy Lannigan reported in the wake of Hurricane Ian in Fort Myers. Her *Atrium* magazine story "Moving forward through the rubble" placed 1st in the nation in feature writing in last year's Hearst Awards. (aka the college Pulitzers) Lucy will join us by Zoom to talk about how she reported Travis's story—and share her experiences with [Report for America](#), a national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on under-covered issues and communities.

Special guest (Weds 2/19 on Zoom): [Lucy Lannigan](#), 2023 CJC grad now Report for America Corps member at the *Albany Herald* and 1st place winner of last year's Hearst Award for feature writing. @LucilleLannigan

To Prepare:

- 1) **Read:** "[Moving forward through the rubble.](#)" by Lucille Lannigan, *Atrium* magazine, Feb 2023.

Week 6, Feb. 24th: How to report and craft scenes

Scenes are "[the building blocks of narrative construction](#)," says the narrative journalist and teacher Lauren Kessler. From film to novels to magazine stories, they bring the audience into the story as if by magic. But scene-setting isn't magic. It's the result of deliberate reporting and crafting just the right amount of detail, dialogue, action and meaning so the reader feels immersed in the scene. This week we'll read some great scene-setting and practice writing your own scenes.

To Prepare:

- 1) **Read:** "[The Long Fall of Phoebe Jonchuck](#)," by Lane DeGregory, *The Tampa Bay Times*.
- 2) **Read:** "[Everybody Knows Flo From Progressive. Who Is Stephanie Courtney?](#)" by Caity Weaver, *The New York Times*, November 25th 2023.
- 3) **Bring:** At least one scene for your profile—to share.

Week 7, March 3rd: The Art of the Interview

Great stories depend on great interviews, and great interviews depend on planning, preparation—and curiosity. This week we'll listen to and read master interviewers David Marchese and Terry Gross and talk about how to plan and execute the kinds of conversations that elicit revelatory answers, telling details and the vignettes that carry your story. **(on Weds, we will begin student-led story discussions and magazine critiques. (Rubric and schedule on Canvas.)**

To prepare (for Monday):

- 1) **Listen to:** "[The Pig Wants to Party.](#)" Maurice Sendak's Latest," a telephone interview (!) with Terry Gross for NPR's Fresh Air.
- 2) **Read:** "[Perfect the art of the interview—with the expert interviewer](#)," Carrie Neill interview for People Nerds with *New York Times* journalist and The Interview host [David Marchese](#).
- 3) **Read:** "[In Conversation: Terry Gross.](#)" David Marchese interview with the longtime Fresh Air host.

Week 8, March 10th: Killer ledes and strong verbs: Zhuzhing up your writing

This week we'll drill down into the fine writing mechanics that draw readers to your story and keep them on the page: Irresistible ledes, active voice and action verbs, sentence lengths and other tricks for making your story sing.

To Prepare:

- 1) **Read:** [“What’s ‘love’ got to Drew with it?”](#) by Travis M. Andrews, *The Washington Post*, December 2023.
- 2) **Read at least the ledes of:** “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold,” by Gay Talese, *Esquire* magazine, April 1966. “The American Man at Age Ten,” by Susan Orlean, *Esquire* magazine, December 1992. (On Canvas.)
- 3) **Bring:** The lede you’re working for the final draft of your profile—to share.

(For Wednesday) Student-led story discussions and magazine critiques.

(Rubric and schedule on Canvas.)

Week of March 17th: Enjoy Spring Break!

Week 9, March 24th: Story Structure: Building a feature that keeps readers with you.

Leading up to your general feature, first draft due Sunday night March 30th, 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:

(For Monday)

- 1) **Read:** [“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.)

(For Wednesday) Student-led story discussions and magazine critiques.

(Rubric and schedule on Canvas.)

Week 10: March 31st: The Art of Editing

Editing is a special skill requiring both a big-picture vision for what a story can be, and attention to detail to ensure every word, sentence and paragraph are working in service to the next—and to the story as a whole. This week we'll learn about the art of editing other journalists' stories and our own.

Special guest: (Weds, in person): CJC senior Lauren Brensel of *Atrium* magazine will share editing tips; opportunities to publish your stories from this class; and possibilities to work on the magazine staff.

To prepare:

- 1) Please have given at least an initial read to the story you're peer editing this week.
- 2) Read: "[What makes an effective editor? Flexibility, mutual trust and chocolate chips.](#)" Carly Stern's Q&A with *The Atlantic* national editor Scott Stossel.
- 3) Read: "[How to edit your own writing.](#)" by Harry Guinness, *The New York Times*.

Week 11: April 7th: Explanatory Reporting

Explanatory journalism "illuminates a significant and complex subject or problem, demonstrating understanding and command of the subject," according to the Hearst Awards, which offer a category for Explanatory Reporting. Explanatory stories should be crystal clear, demonstrate command of the subject, and provide context and lucid writing. This week we'll learn about this special craft—which includes environment, science and health reporting—that some students may like to pursue in CJC's advanced classes or in the profession.

Special guest: (Wednesday, in person): Science journalist Dr. Nadia Drake.

To prepare:

- 1) "Why are people so dang obsessed with Mars?" by Nadia Drake, *National Geographic*.
- 2) "Why alien hunters have spent 60 years finding new solutions for the drake equation," by Nadia Drake, *National Geographic*.

Weeks 12, 13, 14:

Student-led story discussions and magazine critiques.

(Rubric and schedule on Canvas.)

Last day of class is Monday, April 21st. (Cynthia will be at a conference Weds the 23rd.)



COURSE POLICIES

Safety and security: Your safety and security are paramount and supersede the value of any content our class might produce. If you are interviewing or photographing a subject of our reporting in a private setting – such as the person's home or private office or isolated setting – please inform me before you leave. We may conduct a quick background check on your source and establish a security plan so that we know where you will be, when you would expect to be finished and when you will contact me to let me know you're back. I also want to know if you head out in the wake of a hurricane or other disaster. I may suggest a classmate or instructor accompany you.

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 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/) and provide appropriate documentation. Once registered, you'll receive an accommodation letter which must be presented 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. These programs can be useful for brainstorming headlines and the like—but you may not turn stories or parts of stories generated by AI.

Class attendance is calculated in your grade. 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.

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 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 TEACHER

Cynthia Barnett is Environmental Journalist in Residence and Director of Climate and Environment Reporting Initiatives in the College of Journalism and Communications. She is an award-winning 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*, long-listed 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 was once sitting in your seats in Weimer Hall; Cynthia 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 Mom to a college-age son and daughter and lives with her husband just north of campus in the Florida Park neighborhood, where she likes to do walk-and-talk office hours.