

 Magazine & Feature Writing
with Cynthia Barnett
JOU 4308
FALL 2025

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

Cynthia's contact & office hours

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Office Hours for Students: Walk-in @ 3063: Mondays 2-3 and Wednesdays 3-4.

By appointment: Phone; Zoom; Office; or Walk & Talk in the 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 read and 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 and a general feature that illuminates a current news or social topic.

- 🌱 No textbook is required, but students seeking additional insights and inspiration for story approaches and mechanics may like the free resource [Writing Fabulous Features](#) by Nicole Kraft.
- 🌱 Students interested in a possible features career should join the [Society for Features Journalism](#) (free!) with great resources and training opportunities, including “Show and Steal” story sessions.

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; your peers; and the most talked-about magazine and feature writing.
- 🌱 Learn where and how to find compelling features.
- 🌱 Deepen your reporting, interviewing and research skills.
- 🌱 Become a clear, concise, original, engaging feature writer.
- 🌱 Identify 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 them before Monday’s class of each new week. Each student will also choose a magazine/features platform to read this semester. You’ll be bringing favorite story subjects, leads, organizational structures, etc., to class, so make sure it’s a magazine you that inspires you—and that you can find it at the library, borrow it, or afford a subscription.

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 choose your magazine by September 8th and drop the name 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 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 & GRADES: (Detailed instructions for each in Canvas)

- 🍃 Attendance and Engagement: **100** (Roll call, analyzing the weekly assignments and class participation including insights from your magazine.)
- 🍃 Magazine presentation: **100** (Staggered, informal presentations on your magazine will include you assigning a reading and leading a class discussion on it. Rubric and schedule on Canvas.)
- 🍃 Reported first-person essay: **100** (500-800 words due Sun Sept. 7th)
- 🍃 Place-based feature: **100** (500-800 words due Sun Sept. 21st)
- 🍃 Profile pitch: **50** (500 words due Sun Sept. 28th)
- 🍃 Profile first draft: **100** (1,200-1,800 words due Sun Oct. 12th)
- 🍃 Profile peer edits: **50** (you'll be graded on your thoughtful edits and feedback on a classmate's profile, due Sun. Oct. 19th)
- 🍃 General feature pitch: **50** (500 words due Sun Oct 26th)
- 🍃 Profile final draft: **100** (1,200-1,800 words due Sun Nov. 2nd)
- 🍃 General feature first draft: **100** (1,500-2,000 words due Sun Nov. 16th)
- 🍃 General feature peer edits: **50** (you'll be graded on your thoughtful edits and feedback on a classmate's general feature, due Sun Nov. 23rd)
- 🍃 General feature final draft: **100** (1,500-2,000 words due Weds Dec. 3rd)

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: (Aug 25th & 27th)

Introductions, to each other and the craft

Monday: Introduction to the class and syllabus. Wednesday: 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.

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) **Prepare** to briefly introduce yourself by way of an object/food/etc.

Week 2: Sept 3 (Off Mon for Labor Day. Weds class ends 1:40 this week only.)

The first-person narrative

To strengthen your reported first-person essay due Sunday night, on Wednesday we'll go over tips and best practices for first-person narrative writing.

To Prepare:

- 1) [As a baby, I was left on a street by ... someone. As an adult, I tried to figure out why, by Théoden Janes, *The Charlotte Observer*.](#)
- 2) [“In 691 Hours Working in an Assisted Living Facility, I saw Neglect, Abuse and Love,” by Cleo Krejci, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, July 2024.](#)

Week 3: (Sept 8th and 10th)

What's a feature story, and what makes for great features?

Please put in some extra time reading this week so that we can spend time 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."

Special guests (Weds 9/10 in person): *Atrium* editor in chief Delia Rose Sauer and Managing Editor Kylie Williams will visit class to talk about how to publish in and get involved with *Atrium*, CJC's award-winning narrative nonfiction magazine.

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 4: (Sept 15th and 17th)

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 cliches? (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 Sunday 9/21.)

Special guest (Weds 9/17 in person): WUFT Report for America Corps member Rose Schnabel. @r_schnabe

To Prepare:

- 1) **Bring:** The place you are writing about for your place-based story due 9/21, and any challenges.
- 2) [“Freedom, Wyoming”](#) by Kim Cross, *The New York Times*, August, 2021.
- 3) “Making Perfume from the Rain,” by Cynthia Barnett, *The Atlantic*, April 2015. (On Canvas)
- 4) [“Baling pine straw for pennies,”](#) by Rose Schnabel, WUFT.
- 5) [“Florida lacks language laws for disaster communications, leaving counties, residents on their own,”](#) by Rose Schnabel, WUFT, September 2024

Week 5: (Sept. 22nd and 24th)

Introduction to profiles

This week we’ll meet features master Théoden Janes to learn how he connects with profile subjects to uncover the details and defining moments that make his stories both intimate and expansive. We’ll also talk nuts and bolts for finding, reporting and writing your own profiles to help strengthen your pitch on a profile subject due 9/28.

Special guest (Weds 9/24 on Zoom): *Charlotte Observer* feature writer Théoden Janes. @theodenjanes.

To Prepare:

- 1) **Bring:** your profile ideas to share with the class Monday, and any challenges/triumphs.
- 2) “It’s an Honor,” (the Gravedigger Story) by Jimmy Breslin, *The New York Herald Tribune*, November 1963. (On Canvas).
- 3) [“He rides a BMX bike all over Charlotte, every day, with a smile. Who is this mohawked man?”](#) by Théoden Janes, *The Charlotte Observer*.

Week 6: (NO CLASS Mon 9/29; Cynthia is traveling. Meet Weds Oct. 1st.)
Finding fresh, original ideas—and reporting 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 the following year's Hearst Awards (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](#), the national service program.

Special guest (Weds 10/1 on Zoom): [Lucy Lannigan](#), 2023 CJC grad now Report for America Corps member at the *Albany Herald*. @LucilleLannigan

To Prepare:

- 1) "[Moving forward through the rubble](#)," by Lucy Lannigan, *Atrium* magazine, Feb 2023.
- 2) "[Cooperatives empower Black farmers amid historic discrimination & land loss](#)," by Lucy Lannigan, The Groundtruth Project and *The Albany Herald*, 1st place story in Enterprise Writing in the 2025 Georgia Press Association's Better Newspaper Contest.

Week 7: (Oct. 6th and 8th)
The Art of the Interview

Great stories depend on great interviews, and great interviews depend on planning and preparation. This week we'll study and meet the master interviewer and Pulitzer Prize-winning feature writer [Lane Degregory](#) of the *Tampa Bay Times*.

Special guest (Weds 10/1 on Zoom): [Lane DeGregory](#), *enterprise reporter for hope and humanity at the Tampa Bay Times*.

To Prepare:

- 1) "[The Long Fall of Phoebe Jonchuck](#)," by Lane DeGregory, *The Tampa Bay Times*.
- 2) "[Waving Statue of Liberty works hard to realize American dream](#)," by Lane DeGregory, *The Tampa Bay Times*.

- 3) “[A spotlight on the art of the interview](#),” by Kim Cross, plus all five sidebars:
News vs. story interviews + the interview phases: pitch; arc; sequence; and scene.

Week 8: (Oct. 13th and 15th)

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, and go over how peer edits will work in class.

To prepare:

- 1) **Give at least an initial read** to the story you’ll be peer editing this week so you get any questions answered about the process before the first peer-edit deadline 10/19.
- 2) “[How to edit your own writing](#),” by Harry Guinness, *The New York Times*.
- 3) “[What makes an effective editor? Flexibility, mutual trust and chocolate chips](#),” Carly Stern’s Q&A with *The Atlantic* national editor Scott Stossel.

Week 9: (Oct. 20th and 22nd)

Story structures

Leading up to your general feature, we’ll go over story structures, narrative arc and other organizational tips to help you build a clear, compelling, well-organized longer story. Special guest Ethan Bauer will join us to talk about how to noodle structure, and his narrative non-fiction course that you may consider next if you enjoy magazine and feature writing.

Special guest: [Ethan Bauer](#), staff writer, *Deseret* magazine, and CJC narrative nonfiction professor.

To prepare:

- 1) “[The pursuit of forgiveness](#),” by Ethan Bauer, *Deseret* magazine, Dec. 14th, 2023.

- 2) “[A 150-million-year journey from the Jurassic to Exposition Park](#),” by Corinne Purtill, *The Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 15th 2024.
- 3) “[Structure](#),” by John McPhee, *The New Yorker*, 2013.

Week 10: (Oct. 27th and 29th)

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 masterful scene-setting and practice writing your own scenes.

- 1) **Bring:** A scene from your final profile draft—to share.
- 2) **Read:** [Reporting and Writing Scenes](#),” by Lauren Kessler.
- 3) **Read:** “[What’s the Future of Solitary Confinement? Frank de Palma Spent a Third of his Life Alone. Researchers and lawmakers are only beginning to understand that that does to a person.](#)” by Natalia Galicza, *Deseret Magazine*. This story was a finalist for this year’s National Magazine Award, a huge honor for a recent CJC grad!

Killer ledes and strong verbs: Zhuzhing up your writing

Week 11: (Nov. 3rd and 5th)

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) **Send me by midnight Sunday:** A favorite lede from the magazine you're reading this semester.
- 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.)

Week 12: (Nov. 10th and 11th)

Specializations Part I: 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 your understanding 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.

To prepare:

"[Mascot for Cruelty](#)," by Sarah Henry, *Atrium* magazine, October 2024—placed in the explanatory reporting category in this year's Hearst Awards.

"[One of the World's Biggest Sea Snails at Risk of Extinction](#)," by Cynthia Barnett, *National Geographic*, April 2022.

Week 14: (Nov. 17th and 19th)

Specializations Part II: Arts & Entertainment and Lifestyle Reporting

PREPARE:

- 1) "[Forget the Academy. Our nominees are ...](#)" by Wesley Morris, *The New York Times*, Feb. 18th 2024.

- 2) “[Costco’s \\$100, 14-pound serrano ham leg is both a blessing and a burden](#),” by Joseph Lamour, Today.Com, Dec. 2024.
- 3) “[Why A.I. Isn’t Going to Make Art](#),” by Ted Chiang, *The New Yorker*, Aug. 2024.

Week 14: (Dec. 1st and 3rd)

Last week of class! We’ll workshop final stories and finish student magazine presentations. Plus, publishing your stories and promoting your work; meditations on magazine and feature writing; next steps and careers; and an “Ask Cynthia Anything” session!



COURSE POLICIES

Safety and security: Your safety and security are paramount and supersede the value of any stories 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 the boondocks – 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 that 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](#). Once registered, you'll receive an accommodation letter to provide me when requesting accommodation.

Academic Honesty is always expected. As a UF student, you've agreed to comply with the [Honor Code](#). Please make sure you understand the code and consequences. Any violations of the code in our course 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 finding layered information—but they also generate considerable mistakes so must be fact-checked. You may not turn stories or parts of stories generated by AI. We will talk about the evolving generative landscape through the semester, including studying the disinformation spread by AI.

Class attendance: [Requirements for attendance and other work fall under UF policies here](#). If you need to miss for illness or professional travel, I will provide links from Zoom lectures or slides from mine; get notes from a classmate. Otherwise, any reason for absence from regular class that does not appear on UF's list of excused absences will result in an automatic 25-point deduction per missed class.

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.

Story 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 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. Sometimes a source will want you to let them 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 understood and translated. 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 and interview mandates will lose points.



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 the environment 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. She's written on the environment for *National Geographic*, the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, the *Atlantic*, *Discover*, *Salon*, *Politico*, *Orion* and others. She once was in your seats here at 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 24-year-old son and 21-year-old 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.