

JOU 4311: Narrative Nonfiction Writing

Spring 2026 | Section NNF1 | R 9:35-12:35



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Office Hours: R 12:35 to 2:35, or by appointment. 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

I will send out reading assignments on a weekly basis — most chosen by me, but some chosen by 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: 200 points

Third draft: 300 points

Participation: 200 points

Assignments in-depth

Assignment	Due Date(s)	Description	Points	% of Course Grade
Feature pitch	Jan. 30	A formal pitch for your final project, which is what you'll spend the entire semester working on	100 points	10%
First draft	Feb. 27	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 27	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 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.

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.

The formatting addendum: Please turn in assignments as a Word document or Google Docs link with appropriate sharing permissions; **not as a PDF**. Also, please format every story submission with a story title; subhead; and byline.

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.aa.ufl.edu/publicresults/>.

About me

I'm 29 years old. I'm originally from Miami, Florida, and I now live in St. Petersburg with my wife, our son, our border collie and two 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 week, 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. 15	Syllabus day. What is narrative nonfiction?	"The Kentucky Derby is decadent and depraved," by Hunter S. Thompson; "Frank Sinatra has a cold," by Gay Talese; "Hub fans bid kid adieu," by John Updike
2	Jan. 22	Pitching/story selection. What does a good narrative nonfiction piece need?	"Finding Henry," by Ethan Bauer; "Alone," by Natalia Galicza; "The Most Surveilled Place in America," by Gaby del Valle
3	Jan. 29	Narrative reporting and story structure Feature pitch due Friday	"The Falling Man," by Tom Junod; "The trouble with shaken baby syndrome," by James Ross Gardner; "Pure Heart," by Bill Nack; "You can't quit cold turkey," by Tommy Tomlinson
4	Feb. 5	First-person narrative storytelling.	"Snowfall," by John Branch; "What Mitt Romney saw in the Senate," by McKay Coppins; "Why two chefs in small-town Utah are battling President Trump," by Kathryn Schulz
5	Feb. 12	Balancing between the narrow and the big picture	"Telling JJ," by John Woodrow Cox; "The kidnapping I can't escape," by Taffy Brodesser-Akner; "A supposedly fun thing I will never do again," by David Foster Wallace

6	Feb. 19	Dialogue	“The Prodigal Mother,” by Alexandra Rain; “What do we owe her?” by Liz Bruenig; “Fatal distraction,” by Gene Weingarten; “The white flight of Derek Black,” by Eli Saslow;
7	Feb. 26	Ledes and nut grafs First draft due Friday	“A British nurse was found guilty of killing seven babies. Did she do it?” by Rachel Aviv; “The abortion absolutist,” by Elaine Godfrey; “The case for marrying an older man,” by Gizzie Sophia Christie
8	March 5	Description	“Rapture of the Deep,” by Gary Smith; “The kids on the night shift,” by Hannah Dreier; “A most American terrorist: The making of Dylann Roof” by Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah
9	March 12	Suspense, tension and conflict	“Baseball, barbecue, and losing freedom this July Fourth,” by Howard Bryant; “I don’t want to be an internet person,” by Ginevra Lily Davis; “Moment of truth,” by Gary Smith
10	March 19	SPRING BREAK; NO CLASS	
11	March 26	Finding good stories, plus a brief word on fact checking Second draft due Friday	“America’s Son,” by Tarpley Hitt; “Hiroshima,” by John Hersey; “Among the outside people,” by William T. Vollmann
12	April 2	Fine tuning. Rewriting.	“The Reckoning,” by Pamela Colloff; “Notes from Prince Harry’s Ghostwriter,” by J.R. Moehringer; “The hardest case for mercy,” by Joe Sexton
13	April 9	Empathy	“The LaMelo Show,” by Mirin Fader; “The case of Jane Doe Ponytail,” by Dan Barry; “Prince Vinegar’s last stand,” by Lane DeGregory; “The Great Zucchini,”

			by Gene Weingarten
14	April 16	Last day discussion/Q&A.	N/A
15	April 27	No class, but remember: Final draft due	N/A

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 with many sources; documents from original records request(s); breaks 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; 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 one interview; 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.