

Literary Journalism

Communication 177F/277F

<http://www.stanford.edu/class/comm277f/>

McClatchy Hall Room 410

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Office hours: MW 1 – 2 p.m.

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MWF 10a.m. – 11:50 a.m.

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This course is designed for journalists and other writers who want to learn how to use some techniques of literature to tell the true stories of journalism. Although the kind of stories that you'll be writing could be published in several different media, we'll focus on stories most commonly found in newspapers and magazines, including newspaper Sunday magazines.

We'll cover some theory and history, but we'll concentrate more on the practical and the concrete. At the end of the course I want you to be able to use the techniques of literary journalism, not just to describe its place in the universe. During our discussions, we'll concentrate on such tools as characterization, narrative plotting, scene-setting, point of view, tone and style. We will also discuss the techniques of reporting for literary journalism, interviewing, story organization, word choice, self-editing, invasion of privacy, libel, etc.

I will hand out readings at unpredictable points during the quarter, so if you miss a class, check with one of your colleagues or with me.

Prerequisites and priorities

This course is not a beginning journalism course. Preference will be given to those who have either taken Communication 104 (Reporting, Writing and Analyzing the News), or who have journalism experience, either on a student newspaper or some other publication. If you don't have this experience but are willing to commit to backgrounding yourself on some basic journalism, using materials I will provide, I will consider you for the class.

The class will have a maximum of 15 students. Priority for inclusion in the class goes to MA Journalism students and Communication seniors. In the past I have been able to accommodate students not taking the class for credit, and I will endeavor to do that again as space permits.

Reading

One required book: "Creative Nonfiction," by Phillip Gerard, plus course reader. There should be sufficient copies in the bookstore.

There will be some deadlines for reading in the Gerard book, but I honestly recommend that you just power through it as soon as you can. It's only about 200 pages and well written, so the reading is not difficult.

The reader consists of articles that we'll be referring to directly in class plus some others that I have found useful.

There are a few books that I've found valuable for writers to have and to refer to. I've listed those on a separate sheet. I recommend that you get your hands on at least a couple of them and read around in them. If you're wondering which ones, ask me.

Writing

You'll write three stories:

- A story reconstructing or explaining an event or situation
- A profile of a person
- A final story of either type.

Learning how to rewrite your stories after an editor has edited them is essential. When I read your stories I will make extensive comments on them. You will then rewrite them, often with additional reporting.

Story deadlines:

- A story reconstructing or explaining a situation, event or phenomenon, up to 1,500 words, due Monday, Jan. 28. Rewrite due Monday, Feb. 4.*
- A profile, up to 1,500 words, due at noon Monday, Feb. 18 (yes, I know it's President's Day; you can file electronically). Rewrite due: Monday, Feb. 25.*
- A final story, up to 3,000 words, due Friday, March 14.

Stick to the assigned lengths. Fifty or 100 words too many isn't a problem, but if a story supposed to be 1,500 words comes in at 3,000, I'll mark it down. To help you with this chore, please list the number of words in your story. Also please list all sources of information for your story that are not clearly identified in the body of the story.

STORY TOPICS: While it is a great boon to be able to turn one's personal experiences into stories, that is *not* what you will be doing in this class. You'll be going outside your own experiences to find and write your stories. This means going beyond your family and your immediate circle of friends, too, not to mention your doctor, your favorite high school teacher, your roommate, etc. It also means that you will generally not be writing stories in the first person. Moreover, although you may be using the Internet for some background information, the bulk of what is in your stories will not come from online sources, but from direct, in-person reporting.

Each story and rewrite will be posted to the class website, so that we can see each other's work. We'll discuss them from time to time in class.

Our class discussions on particular techniques will be akin to story conferences, in which we will use the stories you are actually working on as examples. (That is, when we discuss reporting and researching techniques, I'll expect you to talk about your story and how you are reporting it, and to give suggestions to your colleagues about their stories as well.) Thus you should come prepared each time to give an update on your story.

The only other requirement is to choose a published story that exemplifies some aspect of literary journalism and make a brief (5-10 minute) class presentation on it. For this, I ask you to distribute copies of the story ahead of time to everyone in the class.

* *I generally return stories by the next class. If I don't make that deadline, your rewrite deadline will be extended, too.

No final exam. The first two stories will count about 25 per cent each, the final story about 40 percent. The other 10 percent will be for your presentation on the published story and other class contributions.

Details

Stories are due at 10 a.m., at the start of class. The real world of journalism is a deadline-oriented world, and stories turned in late will be marked down, unless you and I have agreed on a different deadline.

Please turn in your story by email OR provide me with one on a disk. The story should be in Microsoft Word or some similar word-processing application and **NO FANCY**

FORMATTING, OK? Stories should be double-spaced, with paragraph indents and without extra spacing between paragraphs. (That is, not block style.)

Although literary journalists use a wide range of techniques, certain standards apply: Spelling, accuracy, grammar are among them. *In particular (given that you will be experimenting with the techniques of literature), DO NOT MAKE ANYTHING UP, including composite characters, and don't make it seem like you were present at an event or occurrence when you were not.* And if it isn't in your notes, it shouldn't be in your story. Questions about style should be resolved with the Associated Press Stylebook (available at the Bookstore or in the reference section of the Law Library).

Schedule

The class will meet three times a week during the first part of the quarter, and then taper off as the quarter goes on. The idea is that near the end of the quarter you'll be spending more time reporting and writing and less time in class. What follows is my roadmap for the course. It is not chiseled in granite, and you'll notice some open spaces in it. I like to leave flexibility for issues and themes that pop up during the course.

Wednesday, Jan. 9 – First meeting of class. Ground rules, etc.

Friday, Jan. 11 — No class

Monday, Jan. 14 — What is literary journalism? What can it achieve that other forms of journalism cannot?

Reading:

Gerard, Chapter 1, 7

“Writing: Love it or Leave It,” by Henry Allen

“The Boy Behind the Mask, Part 1-4” by Tom Hallman, Jr. in 2001 Best Newspaper Writing (pp. 3-51)

“A conversation with Tom Hallman Jr.,” in 2001 Best Newspaper Writing, pp. 54-67.

Wednesday, Jan. 16 — Getting started. Ideas and how to generate them, how to recognize the kinds of stories that lend themselves to these techniques

Reading:

Gerard, Ch. 2

“Two Soldiers,” by Dan Baum, The New Yorker, Aug. 9 & 16, 2004

Friday, Jan. 18 — From story ideas to story plans, including reporting plans

Reading:
Gerard, Ch. 3

Monday, Jan. 21 — Martin Luther King Holiday. No class

Wednesday, Jan. 23 — Continuation of discussion on reporting and researching

Reading:
“Details, Details,” by Brad Reagan

Friday, Jan. 25 — And so to write. Organizing your story; finding the right narrative line

Reading:
Gerard, Chapter 6, 8
“The Line Between Fact and Fiction,” by Roy Peter Clark, Jan. 24, 2002, Poynteronline

Friday, Jan. 25 (12 noon on) — Individual story conferences.

Monday, Jan. 28 — First story due

Discussion of challenges and problems

Wednesday, Jan. 30 — First stories returned

Revising stories
Individual sessions during 2nd hour and office hours
Reading:
Gerard, Ch. 10

Friday, Feb. 1 — Profiles

Reading:
“The natural who self-destructed,” by Amy Ellis Nutt, in Best Newspaper Writing 2004
“Actor without Mask or Mirror,” by Robin Finn, New York Times

Monday, Feb. 4 — First rewrite due.

Wednesday, Feb. 6 — Interviewing techniques.

Reading:
Gerard, Chapter 4
“Please give me an example’ and other tips for great interviews,” by Tom Peters.
“Getting the measure of a soul on deadline,” by Louise Reid Ritchie
“Interviews with the Interviewers,” by Lori Luechtefeld, Jan/Feb 2003, March-April 2003, May/June 2003, IRE Journal

Friday, Feb. 8 — No class

Monday, Feb. 11 — Using quotes and dialogue effectively

Reading:

“The Journalist and the Murder,” by Janet Malcolm: pp. 3-5 and “Afterword,” pp. 147-163

Wednesday, Feb. 13 — Openings and endings

Reading:

“A Round-the-clock Race to Rescue the Rach,” by David Stabler, Oct. 6, 2004, Portland Oregonian

Friday, Feb. 14 — No class

Monday, Feb. 18 — President’s day. No class

Profile due

Wednesday, Feb. 20 — Profile returned

Individual discussion sessions

Friday, Feb. 22 — No class

Monday, Feb. 25 — Developing and honing a writing voice

Profile rewrite due

Wednesday, Feb. 27 — No class

Friday, Feb. 29 — No class

Monday, March 3 — Ethical issues in literary journalism

Reading:

“The Legend on the License,” by John Hersey, pp. 1-25, Autumn 1980, Yale Review.

Wednesday, March 5 — No class

Friday, March 7 — No class

Monday, March 10 — Last class.

Wednesday, March 12 — No class

Friday, March 14 — No class

Final story due