Specialized Reporting and Writing:

The Art of Narrative Journalism
How To Tell a True Story

School of Journalism and Mass Communication
019:120:004
JMC:3400:0004

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
The University of Iowa
Fall 2012

PROFESSOR: Stephen G. Bloom

OFFICE AND HOURS: Adler Journalism Building (AJB), Room W-313; Wednesday 2 — 5 p.m., or by appointment.

PHONE: 335-3368 (office) E-MAIL: stephen-g-bloom@uiowa.edu

CLASS LOCATIONS AND TIMES: W-340 AJB, 9:30 a.m. – 11:20 a.m., Tuesday and Thursday

CLASS GREETINGS, GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:
Personal confession: I’m a book, Internet, newspaper, and magazine junkie. I’m a sucker for great nonfiction writing and can’t-put-it-down journalism. I go weak at the knees in the presence of a skilled storyteller. Terrific writing and journalism can make for a lofty goal: to create meaning out of the world. It’s what effective writers do — make meaning out of seemingly disparate events that combined, illuminated, and told in a compelling manner, create a new and important vantage point from which to assess the world (or more likely, a part of the world; usually, your part of the work). That’s what makes good writing great, and what transforms great writers into extraordinary writers.

One key difference between most creative nonfiction and journalism is that journalists are acutely (and unrelentingly) aware of audience — word for word, paragraph by paragraph, page by page. Writing for the reader is always at the forefront of how we go about telling stories.

This course is designed to simulate the experience of a professional writer. Toward that end, we’ll dissect successful (and not-so-successful) writing, as well as hone student skills in researching, interviewing, information-gathering, organizing, and executing the story. The course is an intensive writing workshop that builds upon skills acquired in Journalistic Reporting and Writing (19:098). We’ll also discuss selling your work, i.e., pitching stories and writing e-mail queries to editors. Throughout the semester, we’ll dissect several books and articles published in both paper form and online. The first several classes will be a walk-through of some basic journalistic/storytelling practices and tenets. The rationale: to make certain everyone is (more or less) on the same level. After that, we begin to fly. Some students will have had substantial experience, and that will aid in their development as reporters and writers. Others will not. All students, though, should have acquired competence in reporting and writing before the course commences.

Attention will be given to inspiring you to enhance your skill levels, as well to provide a deeper understanding and appreciation of your strengths. The goal is to improve your writing, develop your style, make sure your material is as good as it can be, and then to offer it to a blog, internet site, magazine, newspaper, or journal.
While you’ll be required to hand in all written assignments by the deadlines set within this syllabus, the subject matter for articles is left entirely up to you (following a pitch to the instructor and fellow students).

Just as in the real world, writers in this class must come up with their own ideas. You are urged to write about issues that intrigue you. Topics for stories can come from anywhere — as long as the subject vitally interests you and a sizeable audience of readers. The classroom will be the venue (I hope) for animated story conferences during which students will vigorously pitch ideas for upcoming stories. Be prepared to discuss story ideas and how you intend to write about them. Be lively. Be assertive. Advocate for yourself and your ideas. Get accustomed to the life of a writer.

TOPICS TO BE COVERED:
The art of telling a story
How to come up with story ideas
What's an angle
Reporting the story
Accessing source material
Interviewing techniques
Quoting people
How to craft winning ledes (openings)
The famous Choo-Choo Train lecture — engines (ledes); coal cars (nut graphs); box cars (informational graphs); and cabooses (powerful endings)
Writing the story
Organization: How to cram all that information into an understandable, logical format
Voice
Folding humor into your writing
Pitching the idea — writing the query
Where to submit
Rewriting (and rewriting) the story
Working with editors
Print vs. Internet
Freelance writing: best job in the business or a life of poverty?
Travel writing
The published story as a staging element for a book proposal (if we have the time and the class has the inclination).

REQUIRED TEXTS:
Copies are also available in the third floor Resource Center, the IC Public Library, University Library, and Prairie Lights Books (15 South Dubuque Street). In the syllabus, this book is referred to as the Text.

ASSIGNMENTS:
Students will be expected to make informal presentations to the class, pitching their story ideas. Students will be required to write seven pieces/essays/reportages, each about a different topic.

FOR THE PENULTIMATE STORY, STUDENTS MUST CREATE A MULTI-MEDIA
PRESENTATION TO THE CLASS, WHICH CAN INCLUDE IMAGES AS WELL AS AUDIO. DETAILS FOLLOW BELOW AND IN CLASS.

Below are the deadlines of all written work:
1) One two-page autobiographical essay (required but not graded), due August 23. This should be a self-contained episodic event in your life.
2) First short piece (500-1,000 words, 2-4 pages), due September 18.
3) Response essay to at least two stipulated essays in *The Art of Fact*, due September 25.
4) Second short piece, due October 9.
5) Three medium-length stories (1,000-1,500 words, about 4-6 pages); due October 23, November 6 (with multi-media dimension), December 6.

Below is a breakdown of the components that make up students’ final grades:
1. Class discussion: 10 percent
2. Short piece 1 10 percent
3. Response paper for *AOF*: 15 percent
4. Short piece 2 15 percent
5. Medium-length piece 1: 15 percent
6. Medium-length piece 2
   (with multi-media component) 20 percent
7. Medium-length piece 3 15 percent

For each story, student must advance to the class a convincing query (either oral or written). Excluding the first assignment and the last (which will serve as the final examination), students can elect to rewrite their articles for a better grade (limited to one letter grade higher; but the story must be reworked, reported, and rewritten; if not, the grade stands). Integral to the class is that students solicit and market their work to print publications and the Internet markets. Don’t write the story just for your fellow students and for me; write it for a mass audience. Get it published. That is what journalism is all about.

In addition to the above assignments, students are required to read contemporary magazines and blogs, and recommend to the class compelling articles worthy of attention. *People* is O.K. to read, but not for this assignment. Internet sites such as the Longform.org, Daily Beast, Huffington Post, Slate or Salon are fine (as are scores more); so are traditional print magazines such as *Harper’s*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair*, *O, Savvy* *Esquire, Smithsonian, The New Yorker*, and *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*.

**GRADING:**
Grading is an inexact science, particularly when it comes to writing. If you are distressed about your grades in this course, please meet with me as the semester progresses. (It’s a good idea to meet with me, by the way, even if you’re NOT distressed about your grades.) Don’t wait till the last week or the last month! Your assignments will be evaluated on several factors: thoroughness, organization, originality, enterprise, focus, clarity, precision, concision, spelling, punctuation and grammar. Don’t pad your papers. Every single word ought to be essential.

Below is a breakdown of basic standards used in evaluating student work, with pluses/minuses as indicators within each letter range. The designation of A+ will be awarded only in extraordinary cases:

A--Exceptionally well written; arresting and probing, thoroughly researched and analyzed. Publishable as is.
B--Basically clear, cohesive, well thought out and well researched, with minor problems of style and organization. Needs some further revision and/or additional material.

C--Superficial, with organizational, stylistic, punctuation, grammar problems; missing vital detail. A major rewrite and additional research required.

D--Serious problems in both form and content. Requires substantial additional research and thought before a successful rewrite can be attempted.

F--Incomplete, confusing, fatal grammatical and syntactic flaws, which makes the piece unacceptable.

Students should expect to spend *at least* two hours per week per semester hour, preparing for this class and completing assignments. This means *a minimum* of eight hours per week. As you prepare for longer, more complicated stories towards the end of the semester, you work load will incrementally increase.

Exceptional work is expected.

**CLASS MANTRAS:**

1) CLIPS, CLIPS, CLIPS
By the end of the course, students' work should be good enough to be published. The bumpy road to employment in writing is to develop an "I can't put this stuff down" portfolio of *published* work. Editors seldom hire a writer based on unpublished articles. This course should help students create a body of work to demonstrate strong writing skills and the promise of professional excellence. Students are urged to keep an ongoing portfolio of their work.

2) CHECK YOUR EGO AT THE DOOR
Hint: this is not easy. The class is neither therapy nor a love fest. It’s about learning to write better. Talent cannot be taught, but it can be nurtured. One of the objectives of this course is to give you the confidence and tools to allow you to write with clarity, insight, pizzazz, and humor (humor is good). This class aims to set a structure of assignments and deadlines with the ultimate goal of allowing students to blossom as writers. The process of reporting and writing does not take place in a vacuum. Editing that improves a story is welcomed (and cherished) by enterprising writers. Editors are your friends.

In this course, your fellow classmates will read some of your work. They may take it home. They will read it aloud in class. (That can be fun.) The idea is to identify what works and help build on the story’s strengths, and on your strengths as a writer and storyteller. Then we move on to specific suggestions about what can be improved. The process leads to concrete suggestions and a better understanding of your work.

**OTHER NOTES:**

1) This is not a class in journal writing, poetry or creative nonfiction. I’m particularly interested in students writing well-constructed, provocative, well-reasoned stories in clear, concise and understandable prose. Journalists are *always* aware of audience; the journalist’s job is to snare, impress and otherwise wow readers by making the stories they write (or edit) so compelling and vital that readers won’t know what came over them as they devour the words. Think about this when tackling assignments for this class.

2) Students must deliver their assignments by deadline — the beginning of the class when the assignment is due. *NO LATE PAPERS WILL BE ACCEPTED.* No paper will be accepted unless it is typed and double spaced. Binders are not necessary, just the assignment (stapled, no paperclips, no torn corners). Students should always keep a backup disk of their work. Proofread your work; use a spell-checker; read your work
again. Then read it again. Then again. Polish it. If you use an adverb, make sure it absolutely needs to be in the sentence. Be your own best editor.

3) ATTENDANCE IS MANDATORY. If you must miss any class because of illness, an emergency, or a University-sanctioned activity, you must e-mail me prior to the beginning of class. No kidding. If you miss two classes without notifying me, you are courting trouble. The class will be run as a large seminar, and as such, your ongoing attendance, engagement and participation is vital to its success. Fellow students and I will be depending on you to bring clarity and enthusiasm to each of our discussions. If you don’t show up, we may worry about you, too.

4) Arrive on time. Late arrivals interrupt the class and are a discourtesy to other students. Recurrent tardiness is a sign of immaturity, bad planning, personal transportation issues (all bad raps for writers, journalists, academics, anyone).

5) Turn off your cell phone and portable computer during class. Note taking must be done by hand. No text messaging will be allowed.

6) Discuss your work with me. No questions are stupid. Given a couple of days, I will gladly read drafts of a paper in progress. I am here to serve you. If you’d like to talk about the readings or about a career in journalism/writing, I’d welcome a visit.

7) Plagiarism, or the use of others’ work as one's own, is a serious violation of university, academic, and journalistic standards. Anyone who plagiarizes will receive a grade of F in the course. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please ask. Students who commit academic fraud, dishonesty, or cheating will be subject to the rules and regulations of the School, College, and University. Students are expected to be honest and honorable in their fulfillment of assignments.

8) Students have a responsibility to the rest of the class to help create a classroom environment where we all learn. Students are expected to follow rules of decorum as set by the School, College, and University.

9) If students want to publish their work, do it after the piece is submitted for this class.

10) Students who have a disability that may require modification of course requirements in any way are encouraged to contact the instructor so that appropriate arrangements may be made. It is the student's responsibility to contact Student Disability Services. For more information, please visit this site. [www.uiowa.edu/~sds/] and obtain a Student Academic Accommodation Request form (SAAR). The site will specify what course accommodations may be judged reasonable. Your instructor will endeavor to make all accommodations for anyone with physical or learning disabilities. I welcome hearing from anyone who has a disability that may require seating modifications or accommodations of other class requirements, so that appropriate arrangements may be made. Please let me know. I will keep such requests confidential.

11) Students with suggestions or complaints about anything that happens in this course should not hesitate to talk to the instructor. If a problem cannot be resolved within the structure of the course, students are encouraged to contact David Perlmutter, the director of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication (335-3482). If a satisfactory outcome is not obtained, students are then urged to discuss such issues with personnel in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (the administrative home of the School and this course) and submit a complaint to the Associate Dean for Academic Programs, 120 Schaeffer Hall, (335-2633). Please consult the Liberal Arts Bulletin for a full discussion of grievance procedures.

12) Sexual harassment undermines the mission of the University and threatens the wellbeing of students, faculty, and staff. Sexual harassment in any form will not be tolerated.

13) University policy specifies that students are responsible for all official correspondence sent to their University of Iowa e-mail address (@uiowa.edu). Please check your university email daily.
14) In severe weather, class members should seek shelter in the basement of Adler Journalism Building.

**TENTATIVE CLASS SCHEDULE**

**Week One**
Lecture No. 1 and discussion  
Tuesday and Thursday, August 21 – 23, 2012  
— Introduction; course overview; expectations; assignments; grading.  The flashlight: shining a light into dark corners.  Pass around *Chicago Tribune* vending machine: “Ideas Sold Here.”  
Writers make sense out of the world.  Who I am; who you are.  Journalistic terms: a glossary.  Feature writing, magazine writing, in-depth reporting, nonfiction writing, the personal narrative, narrative journalism: What's the difference, anyway?  
• Write 500 word autobiographical essay about a specific experience you underwent, due Thursday.  
This assignment is required for students to stay in class, but will not graded.

**Week Two**
Lecture No. 2 and discussion  
Tuesday and Thursday, August 28 – 30, 2012  
— Look up.  
— Opera scenario: Manny and Edna.  
— Paper-based newspapers vs. the Internet: Examples of the possible.  
— We look at the *New York Times’* One-in-Eight-Million series; the *Lexington Herald-Leader’s Healthcare in Rural Kentucky, Tobacco Cutting Contest.*

**Week Three**
Lecture No. 3 and discussion  
Tuesday and Thursday, September 4 - 6, 2012  
— We learn tricks to creating 25 story ideas from a single object.  
— Choo-Choo Train lecture: Engines (ideas); coal car (nut graphs); box cars (informational graphs); and the caboose (powerful endings).  
— An excursion into *The Art of Fact.*  
Discuss story ideas.  
• Read Text, pgs. VII — 36.  
• Write two-paragraph query for first short article; query due next Tuesday; article due September 18.  

**Week Four**
Lecture No. 4 and discussion  
Tuesday and Thursday, September 11 - 13, 2012  
— What exactly is a “response paper?”  
— “Dancer Falls” video.  
— Elizabeth Vargas Interview.  
— The Art of the interview.  
Week Five
Lecture No. 5 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, September 18 – 20, 2012
— Vandalism lecture.
— Discussion of audio-visual project.
— Watch YouTube video of *The Oxford Project*, descend into *The Oxford Project*
— Pitch story ideas for second short piece, due October 2.
— Discussion of The Art of Fact: A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism.
• Read Text, pgs. 37 - 74.
• *Art of Fact* response paper due next class.

Week Six
Lecture No. 6 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, September 25 – 27
— Segue to ideas: where do they come from? How can professional writers constantly come up with fresh ideas? Keeping a notebook. What subjects make compelling articles. Curiously may have killed the cat, but without it, a writer might as well trade his/her computer for a shoe horn.
— Why ledes are so important. We dissect good writing and see how to grab readers.
— DETAILS, DETAILS, DETAILS. Which are important.
— Discuss readings.
• Read Text, pgs. 75 - 102.

Week Seven
Lecture No. 7 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, October 2 – 4, 2012
— The "I" Dilemma. When do you make the story first-person? When is your story so compelling you have to put "I" in it?
— Discuss readings.
• Second article due next Tuesday.
• Query for third article due next class.
• Read Text, pgs. 103 -130.

Week Eight
Lecture No. 8 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, October 9 – 11, 2012
— Discuss queries for upcoming medium-length piece due October 23.
• Work on medium-length story.

Week Nine
Lecture No. 9 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, October 18 – 20, 2012
— Style: What it is, how writers develop it.
— Discuss class readings.
• Read Text, pgs. 131 - 162.
• First medium-length piece due next class.
• Query for second medium-length piece due next week. Piece due November 6. Remember, it must contain a multi-media element in it.
Week Ten
Lecture No. 10 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, October 23 – 25, 2012
— Story conferences: Writers pitch and defend their story ideas.
— Discuss Text.
• Read Text, pgs. 163 - 178.

Week Eleven
Lecture No. 11 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, October 30 – November 1, 2012
— Open, or Dealing with Editors. How to confront a rewrite, or how to convince yourself that editors are on your side.
• Fourth piece due next class.  (PLEASE MAKE COPIES OF STORY, TO BE DISTRIBUTED TO OTHER WRITERS IN CLASS; BE PREPARED TO MAKE MULTI-MEDIA PRESENTATION TO CLASS.)
• Read Text, pgs. 179 - 198.

Week Twelve
Lecture No. 12
Tuesday and Thursday, November 6 – 8, 2012
— Organization: How do you cram all that information into an understandable format?
— Class Critiques.
• Read Text, pgs. 199 - 252.
• Final pitch for story 5.

Week Thirteen
Lecture No. 13
Tuesday and Thursday, November 13 – 15, 2012
— Class Critiques.
— Pitch final query, for story due December 6.
— Discuss Text.

THANKSGIVING BREAK

Week Fourteen
Lecture No. 14
Tuesday and Thursday, November 27 – 29, 2012
— Class Critiques.
• Final story due December 6.

Week Fifteen
Lecture No. 15
Tuesday and Thursday, December 4 – 6, 2012
— Class Critiques.
— Wrap-up.

This schedule is tentative and subject to adjustment as the term unfolds.
ADDENDUM

Here’s more information about the multi-media dimension listed in the syllabus as required for students’ second-to-last story, due November 6.

While this is a class in narrative journalism, that doesn’t mean that what writers produce should necessarily be confined to just words. More and more journalism today requires a multi-media approach. Words alone aren’t enough these days.

For your forth assignment, you are asked to produce something with some element of visual and (if you like) audio. This will be an exercise that attempts to challenge Iowa students’ creativity and ingenuity (GO HAWKS!) In the past, I’ve had students create photo essays, short plays, PowerPoint presentations; research the gender, social, and political implications graffiti in campus bathrooms; record audio interviews with ordinary but extraordinary people; and make YouTube videos.

As with other assignments, you will be asked to pitch your ideas to me and the rest of the class per the syllabus’ schedule. This is an opportunity to stretch your talents. You will not be penalized for any technical deficiencies the assignment may contain; this is a class in writing and we will not cover elements of design or presentation. But, given where journalism is going, multi-media execution has become essential, and that is what this particular assignment is all about.

Don’t fret. Instead use your ability to produce an effort that showcases your ability to reach beyond just words, and combines images and (if you are brave enough) audio. I will provide the class with examples of previous student work in this arena. For this assignment, students ought to supply me with a flashdrive of their assignment.