Narrative Journalism
Non-Fiction Storytelling Across Platforms
The Art of Telling the True Story
3470:0001
School of Journalism and Mass Communication
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
The University of Iowa
Spring 2015

PROFESSOR: Stephen G. Bloom

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

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CLASS LOCATIONS AND TIMES: W-336 AJB, 2 p.m. – 3:50 p.m., Tuesday and Thursday

CLASS GREETINGS, GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:

Personal confession: I’m a book, Internet, newspaper, blog, zine, 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 great 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 (usually, your part of the world). That’s what makes good writing great, and what transforms great writers into extraordinary storytellers.

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, creating can’t-look-away content for the viewer is always at the forefront of how journalists go about telling stories.

This course is designed to simulate the experience of a professional writer and multimedia journalist. Toward that end, we’ll dissect successful (and not-so-successful) writing and multimedia presentations, as well as hone student skills in researching, interviewing, information-gathering, organizing and executing the story. The course is an intensive workshop that builds upon skills acquired in Journalistic Reporting and Writing (19:098). We’ll discuss selling your work, i.e., pitching stories to editors. Throughout the semester, we’ll dissect articles and multi-media documentaries published in both print and online formats. The first several classes will be a walkthrough of 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, writers, content providers and online video producers. Others will not. All students, though, should have already acquired competence in reporting and writing before the course commences. Soon, we will all share varying degrees of skills in a wide array of applications; students are urged to play to their interests and strengths in creating stories for this course. For example: If you are a double major in J/MC and Spanish, use your language skills to descend into stories about the Hispanic communities in Muscatine and West Liberty; if you love Internet gaming, produce content about the latest, greatest online game scams. If sports is your thing, report about Hawkeye Football’s plans to do better next year than it did by losing 28-45 in the 2015 TaxSlayer Bowl.

Attention will be given to inspiring students to enhance their skill levels (wherever they may be), as well to provide a deeper understanding and appreciation of their abilities. The goal is to improve
writing, develop a singular style, make sure student material is as good as it can be, and to offer it up to blogs, websites, magazines, newspapers, or journals.

While students will 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 each student (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. Students are urged to write about only issues that intrigue them. Topics for stories can come from anywhere — as long as the subject vitally interests the student and potentially an audience of readers. The classroom will be the venue (I hope) for animated story pitches during which students vigorously sell their ideas for upcoming stories.

Be lively. Be assertive. Advocate for yourself and your ideas. Get accustomed to the life of a writer or Internet content producer. This is not a course for the timid. Nor is it a course for those easily put off from a writer’s primary goal: getting his/her work published online or in a print format.

TOPICS TO BE COVERED:
The art of telling a story
How to come up with story ideas
Creating effective online stories
What's an angle
Reporting the story
Accessing source material
Interviewing techniques
Quoting people
How to craft winning ledes (openings)
The 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 writing
Pitching the idea — writing the query
The ethics of reporting
Where to submit
Rewriting (and rewriting) the story
Working with editors
Print vs. Internet
The amazing world of Op-Docs
Freelance writing: best job in the business or life of poverty?
The published story as a staging element for a book proposal (if we have the time and the class has the inclination).

REQUIRED TEXTS:

ASSIGNMENTS:
Students will be required to write six pieces/essays/reportages. FOR THE PENULTIMATE STORY, STUDENTS MUST CREATE A MULTIMEDIA PRESENTATION TO THE CLASS, WHICH MUST INCLUDE IMAGES AND/OR AUDIO. IF STUDENTS CHOOSE AN AUDIO FORMAT, IT
MUST INCLUDE PHOTOGRAPHS/GRAPHICS IN THE PRESENTATION. THE FORMAT IS UP TO EACH STUDENT. IF STUDENTS PREFER, THEY CAN PRODUCE ALL THEIR STORIES IN A MULTIMEDIA FORMAT. THIS IS NOT REQUIRED, MERELY AN OPTION.

MULTIMEDIAPROJECTS:
While this is a class in narrative journalism, that doesn’t mean that what writers produce should necessarily be confined to just words. Journalism today requires a multimedia approach. Words alone aren’t enough. As stated above, any of your assignments can be multi-media, but for your fourth assignment, you are asked specifically to produce something with some element of visual and/or audio. This will be an exercise that attempts to challenge Iowa students’ creativity and ingenuity (GO HAWKS!). In the past, students have created photo essays, short plays, PowerPoint presentations; researched the gender, social, and political implications of graffiti in campus bathrooms; recorded audio interviews with ordinary but extraordinary people; and uploaded their videos to YouTube. We will use the New York Times’ Op-Docs as the gold standard for quality, substance, and format. 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 for students to stretch their talents and LEAVE THEIR COMFORT ZONES. Students 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, multimedia execution is essential; that is what this particular assignment is all about.

Students ought to view this assignment an opportunity to showcase their imagination. I will provide the class with ample examples of professional — and student work — as exemplars. For this assignment, students ought to supply me with a flash drive or link to their work.

Below are the deadlines of all work required in this course:
1) One two-page autobiographical print essay (required but not graded), due January 22. This should be a self-contained episodic event in your life. Details spelled out in class.
2) First short piece (if print, 500-1,000 words, 2-4 pages; if multi-media, no more than three minutes), due February 17.
3) Second short piece, due March 3.
5) Three medium-length stories (1,000-1,500 words, about 4-6 pages; if multi-media, no more than six minutes); due March 31, April 14, and May 7.

Below is a breakdown of the components that make up students’ final grades:
1. Class discussion: 15 percent
2. Short piece 1 10 percent
3. Short piece 2 15 percent
4. Medium-length piece 1: 15 percent
5. Medium-length piece 2 (with multimedia component) 25 percent
6. Medium-length piece 3 20 percent

Excluding the first assignment and the last, 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 same grade remains). If students skip a paper or assignment, they will not receive an F for that specific exercise, but a zero. Completion of all assignments is mandatory for successful completion of the course.

Don’t write the story just for your fellow students and for me; write it for a mass audience. Get it published, post it online. That is what journalism is all about.

In addition to the above assignments, students are urged to read contemporary Internet and print
magazines, as well as blogs, YouTube videos and other sites they enjoy.

GRADING:
Grading is an inexact science, particularly when it comes to writing. If students are distressed about their grades in this course, please meet with me as the semester progresses. (It’s a good idea to meet with me, 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 (I will notice). Every single word ought to be essential to the telling of your story.

Below is a breakdown of 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 students prepare for longer, more complicated stories towards the end of the semester, the course workload 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 work published online. Editors seldom hire beginning writers based on student articles. This course should help students create a body of work to demonstrate strong writing skills and the promise of professional excellence.

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 sure can be nurtured. One of the objectives of this course is to give students the confidence and tools 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. In this class, editors will be the instructor and fellow students.

Classmates will critique some student work. The idea is to identify what works and help build on the story’s strengths, and on the writer’s strengths as a storyteller. Then we move 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 and/or presenting well-constructed, provocative, creative, well-reasoned stories in clear, concise and understandable prose in print or multimedia formats. Journalists are always aware of audience; the journalist’s job is to snare, impress and otherwise wow readers by making the stories they create (or edit) so compelling and vital that consumers won’t know what came over them as they devour the work. Think about this when tackling assignments.

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 assignment will be accepted unless it is typed and double-spaced or presented on a flash drive. Binders are not necessary, just the assignment (if paper, stapled, please; no paperclips, no torn corners). Students should keep a backup copy of their work. Proofread; use a spell-checker; read the work again. Then read it again. Then again. Polish it. Be your best editor.

3) ATTENDANCE IS MANDATORY. IT IS NOT OPTIONAL. YOU MUST ATTEND EACH CLASS. ROLL WILL BE TAKEN. If you must miss a 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 disaster. The class will be run as a seminar, and as such, your ongoing attendance, engagement and participation will be vital to its success. Fellow students and I will be depending on you to bring clarity and enthusiasm to all of our discussions. If you don’t show up, we may worry about you, too. Since meaningful class participation is factored into your grade, missing classes will negatively affect your grade in a profound way. Merely showing up for class and delivering the required assignments are not a substitution for active and significant class participation.

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). Don’t be late.

5) Turn off your cell phone and portable computer during class. Note taking must be done by hand. No text messaging will be allowed during class. Ever. If you text message, you will be asked to leave on the spot. Stay off the grid; you’ll enjoy the experience.

6) Dress appropriately. No hats, no pajamas. Treat the class with respect, as you would a job. This is your job for the next 15 weeks.

7) Look, act, and be alert. Get enough sleep. Come to class prepared to engage. If you must yawn, cover your mouth. Please don’t smell your hair. If you must leave during class, have the courtesy not to do it in the first 30 minutes.

8) Discuss your work with me. No questions are stupid. Given a couple of days, I will be delighted to review drafts of an article or multimedia project. I am here to serve you. If you’d like to talk about the readings or about a career in journalism/writing, I’d very much welcome a visit.

9) 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.

10) 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 guidelines set by the School, College, and University.
11) If students want to publish their work, seek to do so after the piece is submitted for this class.

12) All assignments for this course must be original and must be written by the student for this class. If students submit work not originated or written by them, they will receive an F for the course.

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

14) Students with suggestions or complaints about anything that happens in this course should not hesitate to contact me. If a problem cannot be resolved within the structure of the course, students are encouraged to contact David Ryfe, Director of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication (335-3486) in AJB 305. 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.

15) 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.

16) 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 several times a day.

17) In severe weather, class members should seek shelter in the basement of Adler Journalism Building.

*The Iowa Dozen*

Students in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication are expected to learn the following principles, which — when spelled out — become The Iowa Dozen. In this course, we will be particularly concerned with items 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 & 12.

We learn:
1. to write correctly and clearly
2. to conduct research and gather information responsibly
3. to edit and evaluate carefully
4. to use media technologies thoughtfully
5. to apply statistical concepts appropriately

We value:
6. First Amendment principles for all individuals and groups
7. a diverse global community
8. creativity and independence
9. truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity
We explore:
10. mass communication theories and concepts
11. media institutions and practices
12. the role of media in shaping cultures

**TENTATIVE CLASS SCHEDULE**

Week One
Lecture No. 1 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, January 20 – 22, 2015
— 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. Feature writing, magazine writing, in-depth reporting, nonfiction writing, the personal narrative, narrative journalism: What's the difference?
— Zero Intimidation vs. Real World
• 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, January 27 – 29, 2015
— Final class shakedown. A look at the magazine/narrative marketplace and its history. What's hot, what's not. The future of general-circulation vs. "niche" magazines, YouTube, blogs, Kindles, tablets, zines. We scan the web for the best out there.
— Look up.
— Opera scenario: Manny and Edna.
— Paper-based newspapers vs. the Internet: Examples of the possible:
  • *New York Times*’ One-in-Eight-Million series
  • *Lexington Herald-Leader*’s Healthcare in Rural Kentucky
  • Tobacco Cutting Contest
    [http://vimeo.com/6835871](http://vimeo.com/6835871)
  • *NYT Op-Docs*
  • *StoryCorps*

Week Three
Lecture No. 3 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, February 3 – 5, 2015
— *This American Life’s Penn State No. One Party School documentary*
http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/396/1-party-school
— Google ad
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnsSUqgkDwU
— Flash Mob
http://www.youtube.com/watch_popup?v=GBaHPND2QJg&feature=youtu.be
— Choo-Choo Train lecture: Engines (ideas); coal car (nut graphs); box cars (informational graphs); and the caboose (powerful endings).
Discuss story ideas.
• Write two-paragraph query for first short article; query due next Tuesday; article due February 17.
• Read hand-outs from Truman Capote In Cold Blood, Marvel Cooke’s Bronx Slave Market, Gay Talese’s Silent Season of a Hero.

Week Four
Lecture No. 4 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, February 10 – 12, 2015
— Discuss treasury of great journalism.
— “Dancer Falls” video.
— Elizabeth Vargas Interview.
— The art of the interview.

Week Five
Lecture No. 5 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, February 17 – 19, 2015
— Vandalism lecture.
— Discussion of audio-visual project.
Watch YouTube video of The Oxford Project, descend into The Oxford Project https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3lwUA8iZFlg
— Pitch story ideas for second short piece; that story due February March 3.

Week Six
Lecture No. 6 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, February 24 – February 26, 2015
— Segue to ideas: where do they come from? How can professional writers constantly come up with fresh ideas? Keeping an electronic notebook. What subjects make compelling articles. Curiously may be bad for cats, but without it, writers might as well trade their computers for shoe horns.
— Why ledes are so important. We dissect good writing and see how to grab readers.
— DETAILS, DETAILS, DETAILS. Which are important.
— Second story due next class.

Week Seven
Lecture No. 7 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, March 3 – 5, 2015
— The "I" Dilemma. When do you make the story first person? When is your story so compelling you have to put "I" in it?
• Query for third article due next class.

Week Eight
Lecture No. 8 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, March 10 – 12, 2015
— Discuss queries for upcoming medium-length piece due March 31.
• Work on medium-length story.

SPRING BREAK
Week Nine
Lecture No. 9 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, March 24 – 26, 2015
— Style: What it is, how writers develop it.
• First medium-length piece due next class.
• Query for multi-media piece due next Tuesday, piece due April 14.

Week Ten
Lecture No. 10 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, March 31 – April 2, 2015
— Story conferences: Writers pitch and defend their story ideas.

Week Eleven
Lecture No. 11 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, April 7 – 9, 2015
— Open, or Dealing with Editors. How to confront a rewrite, or how to convince yourself that editors are on your side. Read Michael Wolff’s “A Life Worth Ending,” handout in class.
• Fourth piece due next class. (PLEASE BE PREPARED TO MAKE MULTIMEDIA PRESENTATION TO CLASS.)

Week Twelve
Lecture No. 12 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, April 14 – 16, 2015
— Organization: How do you cram all that information into an understandable format?
— Class Critiques.
• Final pitch for story five.

Week Thirteen
Lecture No. 13 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, April 21 – 23, 2015
— Class Critiques.
— Pitch final query, for story due last class.

Week Fourteen
Lecture No. 14
Tuesday and Thursday, April 28 – 30, 2015
— Class Critiques.
• Final story due last class.

Week Fifteen
Lecture No. 15
Tuesday and Thursday, May 5 – 7, 2015
— Class Critiques.
— Wrap-up.
— List of 27 Items All University of Iowa Students Need To Know
— Where you fit in.

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