Magazine Reporting and Writing

Storytelling for the New Magazine
(syllabus/course designed by Prof. Stephen Bloom)

3410:0001
School of Journalism and Mass Communication
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
The University of Iowa

Spring 2018

Class meets: Tuesdays and Thursdays
3:30 - 4:45 pm, W332 Adler Journalism Building

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Office Hours: Tuesdays after class or by appointment.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:
The School of Journalism and Mass Communications recognizes several core goals in all courses offered.

In this course, we will primarily focus on Writing and Storytelling, as follows:
Understand that clear, concise, correct writing is at the heart of journalistic expression and that reporting and communicating it effectively requires a knowledge and achievement of the highest, professionally-accepted standards in all work.

Learning Objective 1. Students will demonstrate the ability to gather factual story elements, and to evaluate and express them in logical, narrative forms for multiple media and audiences.

Learning Objective 2. Students will display the ability to access and analyze data, report facts accurately, research and edit information responsibly and in a manner commensurate with professional standards.

Learning Objective 3. Students will demonstrate the ability to apply above concepts in a manner that is sensitive to audiences across all media.

We also will cover certain issues of Law & Ethics, as follows:

Learning Objective 1. Students will demonstrate an ability to anticipate and recognize ethical issues when they arise and to reason through them taking multiple perspectives and contexts into account.

Learning Objective 2. Students will demonstrate an ability to explain their ethical approaches and reasoning about a particular dilemma in terms that can be understood by a diverse group of people.

We also will cover certain Multi-Cultural Issues, as follows:

Learning Objective 1: Students will demonstrate an ability to produce media that serve the needs and interests of diverse communities and reflect their voices and experiences.

Learning Objective 2: Students will demonstrate sensitivity to and understanding of the cultures, histories, perspectives, and socio-economic and political situations of diverse groups.

Learning Objective 3: Students will demonstrate an ability to work with members of diverse groups to engage publicly over issues of community interest.
CLASS GREETING:
Having been in the magazine and newspaper industry for more than 20 years, I’ve witnessed the birth of “new” journalism, which then became “digital” journalism and is now generally known as “multimedia” journalism. Along the way I’ve also witnessed the slow, agonizing death of many print outlets, including glossy magazines (anyone remember George or Lucky?) and scores of newspapers across this great land of ours. I’ve also had the pleasure of working with—and editing—great journalists who survived the early 21st Century journalism gauntlet and are doing wonderful work at thriving magazines like Marie Claire, Cosmopolitan, WSJ, The New Yorker, The Atlantic, Wired, Smithsonian, Time, and The New York Times Magazine. In this class, I intend to treat you as working writers reporting to me, the editor in chief of a little-known magazine based in Iowa City, Iowa, called Story magazine. Our tagline is Find a better story, and we’ll tell it. As your editor, I expect you to pitch me (and the class) stories that bring something new to the way we see our world, locally and globally, whether it’s about sports, farming, fashion, or politics.
We’re looking for stories that are well reported, with quality quotes and detailed reporting. Stories that are well-told and well-written, with flair, intelligence and style that keeps a reader reading till the end. Above all, we’re looking for stories that enlighten and entertain, because they’re written by writers who are passionate about their subject, and are having fun discovering the heart of the story as it unfolds. As one of my old editors once told me, “If we can’t have fun, why go into journalism? Finance is a lot easier, and pays a lot better.” That’s the key to writing engaging journalism—caring about your subject and enjoying the learning process that happens in every story you write. From brainstorming a story idea, to pitching to an editor, to finding the perfect lede and filling out the story so that it comes to life for the reader, a writer should be psyched about the process and the payoff of telling a story well and seeing it in print. For no matter how much the digital revolution has changed journalism, one thing remains unchanged: journalism is nothing without a good story, and a good journalist who cares about getting it right.

The textbook for this class is the everyday journalism, both digital and print, that floods our inboxes, Facebook pages, and homes every day. Throughout the semester, I’ll be sharing my favorite pieces with you and other informative essays and pointers in the form of handouts and links. As envisioned by my colleague Stephen Bloom, 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. We’ll discuss selling your work, i.e., pitching stories to editors.

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. We 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 how many former Hawkeye football players are experiencing symptoms of concussive brain injury.

Attention will be given to inspiring students to enhance their skill levels (wherever they may be), as well as 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 an enthusiastic
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 an audience of potential consumers. The classroom will be the venue (I hope) for animated story pitches during which students vigorously sell their ideas for upcoming content.

Unless you are writing in the first person about a friend or family member, you will not be allowed to interview anyone who’s related to you or someone with whom you have an existing relationship. This is lazy journalism, and in the real world a surefire way to get canned from your job. You won’t be allowed to interview your fraternity brothers or sorority sisters. Interviewing your roommates or the people you work with is not permitted. In the real world, such insider journalism is not permitted. Go out and interview someone you don’t know.

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 print format.

**TOPICS TO BE COVERED:**

Brainstorming story ideas by being alert to the ‘story world’
Pitching the idea — writing the query, where to submit?
The art of telling a story
How to come up with great story ideas
Content vs. editorial product: any difference?
Creating effective online stories
What’s an angle
Reporting the story
Accessing source material
Interviewing techniques — to tape or not to tape?
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, finding your own
Folding humor into writing
The ethics of reporting
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:

• Weekly reading/viewing of links and handouts provided by your instructor.

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.

MULTIMEDIA PROJECTS:
While this is a class in narrative/magazine 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 multimedia, 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. In the past, students have created photo essays, short plays, Prezi or 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 Assignment Four 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 a 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 18. 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 13.
3) Second short piece, due February 27.
5) Three medium-length stories (900-1,500 words, about 4-6 pages; if multi-media, no more than six minutes); due March 27, April 10 (multi-media), and May 3.

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 multi-media component) 25 percent
6. Medium-length piece 3 20 percent

* Second to last
Excluding the first assignment and the last, students can elect to redo their assignments for 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 an 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 the instructor; write it for a mass audience. Get it published, post it online. That is what journalism is all about.

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GRADING:
Grading is an inexact science, particularly when it comes to writing. If students are distressed about their grades, please meet with the instructor 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: originality, organization, enterprise, focus, clarity, precision, concision, spelling, punctuation and grammar. Don’t pad your assignments (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/minus 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 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 idea generation, 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 in a “workshop” environment. The idea is to identify what works and help build on the story’s strengths, and on the writer’s skills 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 multi-media 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, or as a link. Binders are not necessary, just the assignment (if paper, stapled; no paperclips, no torn corners). Students should keep a 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 in a big way (15 percent), missing classes will negatively affect your grade in a profound way. Merely showing up for class and delivering the required assignments is not a substitution for active and significant 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 texting, checking your email, surfing the web will be allowed during class (unless part of an assignment). If you do any of these, you will be asked to leave on the spot. Stay off the grid; you’ll enjoy the experience.

6) Dress appropriately. No pajamas. I’d suggest removing your hat. 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.
8) Discuss your work with the instructor. No questions are stupid. Given a couple of days, the instructor will be delighted to review drafts of an article or multi-media project. The instructor is here to serve you. If you’d like to talk about the readings, about a career in journalism/writing, or what happens after you graduate, the instructor would very much welcome a visit.

9) Plagiarism, or the use of others' work as one's own, is a 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, 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. All CLAS students or students taking classes offered by CLAS have, in essence, agreed to the College's Code of Academic Honesty: "I pledge to do my own academic work and to excel to the best of my abilities, upholding the IOWA Challenge. I promise not to lie about my academic work, to cheat, or to steal the words or ideas of others; nor will I help fellow students to violate the Code of Academic Honesty." Any student committing academic misconduct is reported to the College and placed on disciplinary probation or may be suspended or expelled (CLAS Academic Policies Handbook).

10) Students have a responsibility to the rest of the class to help create a classroom environment where everyone learns. Students are expected to follow guidelines set by the School, College, and University.

11) If students want to publish their work, 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) The University of Iowa is committed to providing an educational experience that is accessible to all students. A student may request academic accommodations for a disability (which include but are not limited to mental health, attention, learning, vision, and physical or health-related conditions). A student seeking academic accommodations should first register with Student Disability Services and then meet with the course instructor privately in the instructor's office to make particular arrangements. Reasonable accommodations are established through an interactive process between the student, instructor, and SDS. See http://sds.studentlife.uiowa.edu/

14) Students with suggestions or complaints about anything that happens in this course should not hesitate to contact the instructor. 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. For more information on Hawk Alert and the siren warning system, visit the Department of Public Safety website.
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 16 -18
— Introduction; course overview; expectations; assignments; grading. Why do we tell stories?
  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?
— Why good stories go from the ‘personal to universal.’
• Write 500-word autobiographical essay about a specific experience you underwent that you believe makes a good, self-contained story; due Thursday. This assignment is required for students to stay in class, but will not be graded.

Week Two
Lecture No. 2 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, January 23 - 25
— 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. Content vs. narrative. We scan the web for the best out there.
— 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
  http://www.heraldleaderphoto.com/2008/06/29/audio-slideshow-clinically-impressive/
• Tobacco Cutting Contest
  http://vimeo.com/6835871
• NYT Op-Docs
  http://www.nytimes.com/video/2012/10/15/opinion/100000001846077/bronx-obama.html
  http://www.nytimes.com/video/2012/01/08/opinion/100000001269189/texting-while-walking.html
• StoryCorps
  http://storycorps.org/listen/monique-ferrer/
  http://storycorps.org/listen/james-sargent-and-his-brother-don/

Week Three
Lecture No. 3 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, January 30 – Feb. 1
— 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 Feb. 13.
• Read hand-outs of personal essays, profiles and other stories from The New Yorker, Vanity Fair and other print publications.

Week Four
Lecture No. 4 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, Feb. 6 – Feb. 8
— Discuss “The Man Who Loved Grizzlies” from Vanity Fair
— Watch and discuss “Grizzly Man” - Werner Herzog film
— The art of the interview.
• First article due next class.

Week Five
Lecture No. 5 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, Feb. 13 – Feb. 15
— What do we owe our subjects?
— Discussion of audio-visual project.
Watch YouTube video of Peter Feldstein and Stephen Bloom’s masterful The Oxford Project, discuss genesis of the idea, interviews, journalistic decisions made, etc.
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3lwUA8jZFlg
— Pitch story ideas for second short piece; that story due February 27.

Week Six
Lecture No. 6 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, Feb. 20 – Feb. 22
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. Curiosity may have killed the cat, but without it, a writer might as well trade his/her computer for a shoehorn.
— Why ledes are so important. Read handouts. We dissect good writing and see how to grab readers.
— DETAILS, DETAILS, DETAILS. Which are important.
— Discuss readings.
• Second article due next Tuesday.

Week Seven
Lecture No. 7 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, Feb. 27 – March 1
— The First Person. When to use it. When is your story so compelling you have to put "I" in it? Going from the personal to the universal.
— Discuss readings.
• Query for third article due next class.

Week Eight
Lecture No. 8 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, March 6 – March 8
— Discuss queries for upcoming medium-length piece due April 10.
• Work on medium-length story.

SPING BREAK (enjoy your time off)

Week Nine
Lecture No. 9 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, March 20 – March 22
— Style: What it is, how writers develop it.
— Discuss class readings.
• First medium-length piece due next class.
• Query for multi-media piece due next Tuesday, piece due April 10.

Week Ten
Lecture No. 10 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, March 27 – March 29
— Story conferences: Writers pitch and defend their story ideas.

Week Eleven
Lecture No. 11 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, April 3 – April 5
— 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 MULTI-MEDIA PRESENTATION TO CLASS.)

Week Twelve
Lecture No. 12
Tuesday and Thursday, April 10 – April 12
— Organization: How do you cram all that information into an understandable format?
— Workshop/Class Critique Stories/ Trouble shoot.
• Final pitch for story 5.
Week Thirteen
Lecture No. 13
Tuesday and Thursday, April 17 – April 19
— Workshop/Critique Stories/ Trouble shoot.
— Pitch final query, for story due last class.

Week Fourteen
Lecture No. 14
Tuesday and Thursday, April 24 – April 26
— Workshop Stories/Trouble shoot.
• Final story due last class, May 3.

Week Fifteen
Lecture No. 15
Tuesday and Thursday, May 1 – May 3
— Workshop/Critique Stories/Trouble shoot.
— Wrap-up/Farewell

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