Narrative Journalism
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
Fall 2016

PROFESSOR: Stephen G. Bloom

OFFICE AND HOURS: Adler Journalism Building (AJB), Room W-313; Wednesday 1:30 p.m. — 4:30 p.m., or by appointment.

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CLASS LOCATION AND TIMES: W-340 AJB, 11:30 a.m. –1:20 p.m., Tuesday and Thursday

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 GREETINGS:
Personal confession: I’m a book, Internet, blog, and magazine junkie. I’m a sucker for great nonfiction writing and can’t-put-it-down journalism. I love BuzzFeed, Medium, Vice, Atavist, Narratively, and about three-dozen other websites that I try to read regularly.

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 writing, 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. 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 the
Hawkeye will (realistically) avenge losing 45-16 in last year’s Rose Bowl.

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.

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:**
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
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.

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 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, 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.

* Second to last
Below are the deadlines of all work required in this course:
1) One two-page autobiographical print essay (required but not graded), due **August 25**. 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 **September 20**.
3) Second short piece, due **October 4**.
4) Three medium-length stories (1,000-1,500 words, about 4-6 pages; if multi-media, no more than six minutes); due **October 25, November 8, and December 8**.

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 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.*

**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/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.
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. 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 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, 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 text messaging, 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. If you must yawn, cover your mouth. Don’t smell your hair or go through it for split ends. If you must leave during class, have the courtesy not to do it in the first 30 minutes.

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 multimedia 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, August 23 – 25, 2016
   — 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, August 30 – September 1, 2016
Content vs. narrative. 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
    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, September 6 – 8, 2016
— 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=GBaHPND2OJg&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 September 20.
  • 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, September 13 – 15, 2016
— Discuss treasury of great journalism.
— “Dancer Falls” video.
— Elizabeth Vargas Interview.
— The art of the interview.
• First article due next class.

Week Five
Lecture No. 5 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, September 20 – 22, 2016
— 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 October 4.

Week Six
Lecture No. 6 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, September 27 – September 29, 2016
— 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 shoehorn.
— Why ledes are so important. 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, October 4 – 6, 2016
— 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.
  • Query for third article due next class.

Week Eight
Lecture No. 8 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, October 11 – 13, 2016
— Discuss queries for upcoming medium-length piece due October 25.
  • Work on medium-length story.

Week Nine
Lecture No. 9 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, October 18 – 20, 2016
— 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 November 8.

Week Ten
Lecture No. 10 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, October 25 – 27, 2016
— Story conferences: Writers pitch and defend their story ideas.

Week Eleven
Lecture No. 11 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, November 1 – 3, 2016
— 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
Tuesday and Thursday, November 8 – 10, 2016
— Organization: How do you cram all that information into an understandable format?
— Class Critiques.
• Final pitch for story 5.

Week Thirteen
Lecture No. 13
Tuesday and Thursday, November 15 – 17, 2016
— Class Critiques.
— Pitch final query, for story due last class.

THANKSGIVING BREAK

Week Fourteen
Lecture No. 14
Tuesday and Thursday, November 29 – December 1, 2016
— Class Critiques.
• Final story due last class.

Week Fifteen
Lecture No. 15
Tuesday and Thursday, December 6 – 8, 2016
— Class Critiques
— Wrap-up.

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