Narrative Journalism  
3470:0001  
School of Journalism and Mass Communication  
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences  
The University of Iowa  
Spring, 2020

PROFESSOR: Stephen G. Bloom

PROFESSOR’S OFFICE AND DROP-IN HOURS: Adler Journalism Building (AJB), Room W-313; Tuesday 1:30 p.m. — 4:30 p.m., or by appointment.

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CLASS LOCATION AND TIMES: W-332 AJB, 12:30 — 1:45 p.m., Monday and Wednesday

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-podcast-magazine junkie. I’m a sucker for great nonfiction writing and can’t-put-it-down journalism. I love Medium, Vice, Longreads, the New
Yorker, Narratively, and about three-dozen other magazine websites I try to read regularly. I also love podcasts; my all-time favorite is S-Town.

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 skilled journalists go about telling stories. Journalists write for someone who’s (metaphorically) perched on their shoulder while they’re pecking away at their keyboard.

This course is designed to simulate the experience of a professional writer and/or multimedia journalist. Toward that end, we'll dissect successful (and some 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 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 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 whether any former Hawkeye football players are experiencing symptoms of concussive brain injury. You will determine the topics you write about in this course (following an enthusiastic pitch to the instructor and fellow students). 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. This is both scary and invigorating; it’s also how journalism works in the real world.

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 reporting and writing skills, develop a singular style, make sure student material is as good as it can be, and offer it up to blogs, websites, magazines, newspapers, or journals. Some of you will go on to become journalists. Others will pursue allied fields. Whichever path you choose, you will need strong storytelling skills, which are essential in almost any professional pursuit.

Unless you’re 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. You won’t be allowed to interview your fraternity brothers or sorority sisters, either. Interviewing your roommates or the people you work with is not permitted. (The only
caveat to this is that the person you know has a hella story to tell and you disclose your relationship in the narrative.) In the real world, such insider journalism is generally not permitted. Go out and interview someone you don’t know.

In this class, you have license to be lively and assertive. Be original. A little wild isn’t bad if you want to make it in this business. 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. Those who will succeed in this field must not be daunted by the odds against them. Survival of the fittest at its best (and worst). Because of this, students who have taken this course report that it isn’t easy. We will operate more as a working newsroom than a conventional classroom. This may require some adjustments.

TOPICS TO BE COVERED:
The art of telling a story
How to come up with original story ideas
Pitching the idea — writing the query
Content vs. editorial product: any difference?
Creating effective online stories
What’s an angle?
Reporting/researching the story
Accessing source material
Interviewing techniques
More interviewing techniques
Quoting people
How to craft winning ledes (openings). (If you can’t master this, you’ll be in trouble.)
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: How to develop it.
Folding humor into writing
The ethics of reporting
Where to submit and how
Rewriting (and rewriting) the story
Rewriting the rewrites
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 your favorite sources for narrative stories.

ASSIGMENTS:
Students will be required to write six pieces/essays/reportages. FOR THE PENULTIMATE* STORY, STUDENTS MUST CREATE A MULTIMEDIA PRESENTATION TO THE CLASS,

* Second to last
WHICH MUST INCLUDE VIDEO AND/OR AUDIO. THE FORMAT IS UP TO EACH
STUDENT. IF STUDENTS PREFER, THEY CAN PRODUCE ALL THEIR STORIES IN A
MULTIMEDIA FORMAT.

FOR ONE OF YOUR ASSIGNMENTS, YOU MUST WRITE A PROFILE OF AN
INTRIGUING PERSON WHO HAS A COMPELLING STORY THAT NEEDS TO BE TOLD.

MULTIMEDIA PROJECTS:
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 multimedia, but for your third
assignment, you are asked specifically to produce something visual and/or audio. This will be an
exercise that attempts to challenge Iowa students’ creativity and ingenuity (GO HAWKS!). 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 multimedia
assignment may contain; this is a class primarily in reporting, writing, and storytelling; we will not
cover elements of design or presentation in depth. But, given where journalism is going, multimedia
execution is essential; that is what Assignment Three is all about. Students ought to view this
assignment as an opportunity to showcase their imagination. I will provide the class with ample
elements of professional—and student work—as exemplars. For this assignment, students ought to
supply me with a flash drive or a web 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 27. 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 multimedia, no more than three
minutes), due February 17.
3) Second short piece, due March 2.
4) Two medium-length stories: multimedia (no more than six minutes), due March 30; the profile
story (1,000-1,500 words, about 4-6 pages), due May 4.

Below is a breakdown of the components that make up students’ final grades:
A. Class discussion: 10 percent
B. Short piece 1 20 percent
C. Short piece 2 20 percent
D. Medium-length piece 1 (with multimedia component) 25 percent
E. Medium-length piece 2 (the profile) 25 percent

Excluding Assignment 4, the profile, students can elect to redo any of their assignments 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 an assignment, they will not receive
an F for that specific exercise, but a zero. Completion of all assignments is mandatory.

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 know). 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. There is no exacting rubric in grading writing, but the following criteria will convey general standards:

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 six hours per week. As students prepare for longer, more complicated stories towards the end of the semester, the course workload will incrementally increase.

In computing students’ final grades, the professor retains the absolute right of adding or subtracting points to accurately reflect overall student performance.

Exceptional work is expected.

CLASS MANTRAS:
1) CLIPS, CLIPS, CLIPS
   By the end of the course, student 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. This course should help students create a body of work that demonstrates strong writing skills and the promise of professional excellence.

2) CHECK YOUR EGO AT THE DOOR
   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. 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. Indent each paragraph. 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, edit, then edit 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. If you don’t show up, we may worry about you. The class is run as a seminar, and as such, your ongoing attendance, engagement and participation is essential to its success. Fellow students and I will depend on you to bring clarity and enthusiasm to all of our discussions (and there will be many). Since meaningful class participation is factored into your grade (10 percent), missing classes will affect your grade. Merely showing up for class and delivering the required assignments is not a substitution for active and significant participation. DON’T SIT THERE AND SAY NOTHING!

4) This course firmly upholds the UI policy related to student illness, mandatory religious obligations, including Holy Day obligations, unavoidable circumstances, or University-authorized activities (https://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook/attendance-absences). Students may use this absence form to aid communication; the instructor will decide if the absence is excused or unexcused: (https://clas.uiowa.edu/sites/default/files/ABSENCE%20EXPLANATION%20FORM2020.pdf)

5) 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.

6) Turn off your cell phone and laptop during class. Note taking must be done by hand (check with the instructor for exceptions). Text messaging, checking your email, surfing the web will not 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.

7) 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.

8) Look, act, and be alert. Come to class prepared to engage. If you must yawn, cover your mouth. Please don’t smell your hair, braid it, 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.
9) Discuss your work with the instructor. No questions are stupid. Given a couple of days, I will review drafts of articles and multimedia projects. I’m here to serve you. If you’d like to talk about the readings, a career in journalism/writing, or what happens after you graduate, I’d very much welcome a visit during drop-in hours.

10) 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 courses 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).

11) 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.

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

13) 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.

14) 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 instructor 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/

15) 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 Journalism 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.

16) 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.

17) 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.
18) In severe weather, students 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, 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
Wednesday, January 22, 2020
— 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 Monday. This assignment is required for students to stay in class, but will not be graded.

Week Two
Lecture No. 2 and discussion
Monday and Wednesday, January 27 - 29, 2020
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. 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
- 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
Monday and Wednesday, February 3 - 5, 2020

- 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 Monday; 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
Monday and Wednesday, February 10 - 12, 2020

- 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
Monday and Wednesday, February 17 – 19, 2020

- 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=3lwUA8jZFIg
— Pitch story ideas for second short piece; that story due March 2.

Week Six
Lecture No. 6 and discussion
Monday and Wednesday, February 24 – February 26, 2020
— 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 Monday.

Week Seven
Lecture No. 7 and discussion
Monday and Wednesday, March 2 – 4, 2020
— 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 multimedia story due next class.

Week Eight
Lecture No. 8 and discussion
Monday and Wednesday, March 7– 9, 2020
— Discuss queries for upcoming medium-length piece due March 30.
• Work on multimedia story, due March 30.

Spring Break

Week Nine
Lecture No. 9 and discussion
Monday and Wednesday, March 23 – 25, 2020
— Style: What it is, how writers develop it.
— Discuss class readings.
• Multimedia piece due next Monday.

Week Ten
Lecture No. 10 and discussion
Monday and Wednesday, March 30 – April 1, 2020
• (PLEASE BE PREPARED TO MAKE MULTIMEDIA PRESENTATION TO CLASS.)
— Workshopping multimedia pieces.

Week Eleven
Lecture No. 11 and discussion
Monday and Wednesday, April 6 - 8, 2020
— Workshopping multimedia pieces.
—Dealing with Editors. How to confront a rewrite, or how to convince yourself that editors are on your side.

Week Twelve
Lecture No. 12 and discussion
Monday and Wednesday, April 13 – 15, 2020
— Organization: How do you cram all that information into an understandable format?
— Class Critiques.
— Read Judith Regan Profile in the New York Times Sunday Magazine
• Pitch profile next class for story 4.

Week Thirteen
Lecture No. 13 and discussion
Monday and Wednesday, April 20 –22, 2020
— Class Critiques.
— Pitch final query, for profile, due last class.

Week Fourteen
Lecture No. 14
Monday and Wednesday, April 27 – 29, 2020
— Class Critiques.
• Final story due May 4.

Week Fifteen
Lecture No. 15
Monday and Wednesday, May 4 – 6, 2020
— Class Critiques
— Wrap-up
— Items All University of Iowa Students Need to Know

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