

Feature writing, Spring 2003

Wednesdays, 5:30-10 p.m.

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Course goal: This class aims to help you identify the elements of good feature writing, respond to them as a reader and help you become a better feature writer. We will talk much about the difference between news and feature writing, practice specific skills needed to become a better writer and, in the end, produce a full-length feature story suitable for publication in a magazine or newspaper.

Texts: There is no required text for this course. However, there will be extensive handouts, which you will be expected to read, study and discuss in class.

Attendance: Since this class meets only once a week and for just 10 sessions, attendance and participation at each session is vital. I don't think it's too much to ask to attend all the sessions in such a limited time period. I also expect you to be prompt. Tardiness and attendance will be a factor in your final grade.

In-class assignments: Almost every week, we'll be doing a different type of writing exercise in class. These will be done to practice different skills needed in good feature writing: interviewing, describing, identifying interesting story leads, etc. These assignments are meant to be playful and interesting, so please let it all hang out. None of the writing we do in class will be counted toward your final grade.

Outside reading: This is an essential part of the out-of-classroom work. You'll be asked to regularly read a variety of the best sources of feature writing and bring examples to class for further discussion with others. Among the sources that you should be checking regularly are the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Washington Post newspapers (and especially their Sunday magazine sections). Magazines include New Yorker, Esquire, Vanity Fair, New York and Sports Illustrated. On-line sources include Salon and The Well. All of these are readily available in local libraries, bookstores or on-line.

Deadlines: They are at the heart of all journalism. You must submit your assignments to me on time. No excuses; missed deadlines will result in an immediate mark-down of at least half a grade. For my part, I promise to return your assignments promptly with comments, suggestions, editing, etc., so that they can continue to be reworked in time for the next deadline.

Final assignment: You are going to be asked to produce a full-length feature article suitable for publication. This involves identifying a subject you are interested in (and that others are interested in); identifying a publication that would be interested in publishing the article, reporting and researching the article, writing a draft, correcting and expanding it with new reporting and researching, re-writing it, and, if necessary, repeating the process over again a third or fourth time until we're all satisfied.

Grading: The bulk of the your grade will depend on one major writing project that we will be working on throughout the semester. Since our aim is to have a finished, publishable piece by the end of the session, only that version will be included in the final grade. If you follow this writing and editing process faithfully, there is absolutely no reason why anyone should not receive a good grade in this class. This final project will account for 75 percent of your grade; other factors will include one-smaller out-of-class writing assignment, outside reading, classroom attendance and participation in class discussions.

Deadlines: They are at the heart of all journalism. You must submit your assignments to me on time. No excuses; missed deadlines will result in an immediate mark-down of at least half a grade. This does not just mean having the final assignment done by the last day of class; it means meeting the internal deadlines for drafts and revisions. For my part, I promise to return your assignments promptly with comments, suggestions, editing, etc., so that they can continue to be reworked in time for the next deadline.

Plagiarism. Don't do it. It's the worst thing I can imagine. Copying or using the material of another author or student without clearly referencing it will result in an automatic failing grade.