

Journalism 5700.001 Advanced Feature Writing

Fall 2009

6:30 to 9:20 p.m. Wednesday
Room GAB 204

INSTRUCTOR

George Getschow
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Teacher Assistant

Danny Fulgencio

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Office Hours

My office is GAB 113. Please schedule an appointment if you want to see me. My office hours are Tuesday between 1 a.m. and 2 p.m., and Wednesday between 5:30 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. I recommend that you call me or email me to make an appointment during those hours. I will also make myself available at other times by appointment.

Teaching Tenet

“Then said a teacher, speak to us of Teaching. And he said: No man can reveal to you anything but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge. The teacher who walks in the shadow of the temple, among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind.”

--The Prophet, p. 56

Required Texts

Blundell, William E. *The Art and Craft of Feature Writing*, New York, Plume 1988.

Mitchell, Joseph, *Up in the Old Hotel*, Vintage 1993.

Ken Wells, Michael Lewis, *Floating Off The Page: The Best Stories from The Wall Street Journal*. Simon & Schuster. New York. 2002

Various authors, *Spurs of Inspiration*, Denton. Mayborn Graduate School of Journalism. 2008

Various authors, *Ten Spurs*, Vol. 2, Best of the Best, Mayborn Graduate School of Journalism.

MAYBORN magazine, Frank W. Mayborn Graduate School of Journalism, 2009

Other Materials

-AP *Stylebook*

-Separate notebooks for lectures, interviews and research. (Tape recorders are optional).

-A hardcover personal journal is recommended for those who aspire to become lifetime storytellers.

Course Description

Journalism 3310 is all about storytelling. And storytelling is all about “how to catch and hold a reader’s interest through artful narration of factual material,” as Bill Blundell likes to put it. Bill was the finest feature editor I ever worked with in my 17 years at The Wall Street Journal. He spent several years at the Journal working as the paper’s “writing coach,” traveling to bureaus in the U.S. and overseas giving lectures on storytelling approaches and techniques. Out of this road show came a manual: *Storytelling Step by Step: A Guide to Better Feature Writing*. It provided a number of guiding principles that apply whether one is writing a bread-and-butter mainstream business story or a whimsical, offbeat “A-hed” that runs in the center column of the front page of the paper each day. Over the years, most Journal reporters and editors have followed these guiding principles in preparing every Journal feature. They include: careful planning to make sure the story idea is well conceived, that the story structure is sound, that the themes are clear, and most of all, that the subject is *interesting*.

I was tutored in the Blundell style of feature writing, and many newspapers have adopted this style of writing. It calls for in-depth

research, lively leads, rich anecdotes, pungent quotes, vivid scenes and characters that come alive on the page. But there are a myriad number of approaches to structuring a short or long-form feature, with flair and imagination. The Dallas Morning News, The New Yorker, the Atlantic, Village Voice Media, Rolling Stone, Texas Monthly, D Magaine, Outside, Time, Newsweek, Harpers, Vogue, Vanity Fair, Fort Worth Weekly, to name just a few, have their own style of storytelling.

We will examine stories from all of these publications to learn about storytelling techniques. We will discuss and dissect *Floating Off the Page*, a compendium of the odd and offbeat stories that run in the Wall Street Journal's center column each day. But the main text of this course is *The Art and Craft of Feature Writing*, because in my mind, it provides the best step-by-step guide for unearthing the mystery of reporting and writing features through a clear, step-by-step process. What sets it apart from other books of its ilk is that it considers reporting and writing as an interrelated process, which it is. And whether you're writing for a newspaper, a magazine or an on-line publication, the same craft elements apply.

Course Requirements

Your first assignment, beginning the second week of class, is for *The Denton Record Chronicle*. You will be working the Dawn Cobb, managing editor of the Denton Record-Chronicle and other newsroom staff to develop two features for the Denton Record Chronicle during this semester. The features will be published in an popular magazine published by the Chronicle . The focus of this semester's DRC stories is "Lost jobs. New opportunities. Foreclosed homes. First-time homebuyers. Dwindling portfolios. Families reuniting under one roof."

In the changing climate of today's world with its economic strife, a new president with different ideas, two ongoing wars, health care reform and its ensuing debate – points of view differ among many. Are our lives changing for the positive? Are they changing in negative ways? Or, is it somewhere in between? Our goal in this upcoming special edition is to capture slices of life among North Texas residents experiencing both the positive and negative sides of today's top issues. For example, the DIY (do it yourself) movement is gaining ground among a new generation eager to return to a more natural lifestyle and living within their means after the recent economic downfall. More families are clipping coupons, setting up co-ops to buy food, and spending vacations closer to home with family and friends. The fundamental lifestyle change is occurring across all ages

as people adjust to a new reality. Other changes are reflected by people choosing new career paths when past choices leave them jobless. Some are returning to school to be re-educated in new careers. Families are moving to more bustling regions across the country in search of jobs. North Texas happens to be one of those “bustling regions” that is offering opportunities as growth continues. Where are we seeing these changes? Who is coming into the North Texas region? Is the region really bustling? In a special edition slated for February 2010, we will be taking an in-depth look at changing lives – from the components of change to the “slice of life” looks at people’s lives.

The mission will be identifying fundamental changes of today’s economic/political/demographic/societal segments and applying them to the North Texas region. Through this in-depth study, we will identify thematic issues to include both positive and negative effects of change and its application to everyday life. We will also look at how change could affect the future in these segments, taking our stories one step further. This will involve significant research, interviewing, reviewing, writing and rewriting as we delve further into the fundamental changes. The end result will be a series of stories at 2,000 to 3,000 words each leading up to and included within the special Changing Lives edition in February.

For your in-depth feature, one in the series, you will be required to do preliminary research and interviews and write a story proposal that will spell out the nature of the story, the theme of the story, and some of the characters you will use to tell it. I will give you some models of what I want your proposal to look like.

Writing a proposal is a crucial step in developing a feature story because it forces the writer to boil the story down to its basic dimensions - the theme, the setting, the scope, the characters – and to demonstrate that you have a plan for executing the feature. Every *Wall Street Journal* reporter is required to submit a well-crafted proposal to the Page One Editor. The editor determines whether the story is worthy of publication based on the quality of the proposal. In this class, you also will be required to submit a well-crafted proposal for your first feature and other special editions of the *Denton Record Chronicle*. Your proposals should be addressed to Dawn Cobb, the editor of the *Denton Record-Chronicle*, and will be evaluated by Dawn, Danny and myself.

Once your proposal is approved, you will have four weeks to complete the first draft of your first feature. The first draft of your feature will be evaluated and critiqued during the workshop. (I’ll provide you with workshop evaluation forms). You should leave the workshop with specific, concrete suggestions on how to improve your draft. You will

then have another week to revise the feature, whereupon it will be critiqued again in a “revision workshop.”

Most jobs in journalism these days require a multi-dimensional approach to the art of storytelling. All the features should be accompanied by an audio presentation and/or a photo album. Video is acceptable if capabilities are available. Danny Fulgencia will work closely with you on photography and the multi-media components of your features.

You will also write several critical response essays analyzing the writing techniques employed by Joseph Mitchell in his nonfiction anthology, *Up in the Old Hotel*. An exegesis of well-crafted prose is essential for anyone who seeks to become a better writer. And that’s why you will examine the storytelling devices employed by nonfiction writers to make their stories come alive on the page.

I’d also encourage you to read the following blogs and websites that focus on storytelling....

<http://gangrey.com/> -- especially recommended; a website created by young writers who came to the conclusion that good feature writing might just save the newspaper because

<http://www.themayborn.com> –highly recommended; a website featuring the work of speakers at the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Writers Conference of the Southwest, a tribal gathering of storytellers seeking to elevate the quality of their nonfiction writing.

<http://www.poynter.org/> -- indispensable site for the journalist, print or electronic, and public relations professional.

<http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/narrative/digest/index.html> -- This site will keep you up on current thinking about features.

Other Sites:

<http://www.dallasobserver.com/blogs/>

<http://www.dallasblog.com/>

<http://frontburner.dmagazine.com/>

<http://dallasprogress.blogspot.com/>

<http://www.newswatch.org/>

<http://reporter.umd.edu/>

The goal is to make you a better writer than you are today. And the best way that I know to accomplish that is to read and examine models of good writing in books, newspapers and magazines. To that end, we will read and deconstruct some of the best feature writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Denton Record Chronicle*, *The*

Oregonian, D Magazine, Atlantic Monthly, Harpers, Outside, The Oprah Magazine, Sports Illustrated, Vanity Fair, The New Yorker, Village Voice Media and other newspapers and magazines.

Workshops:

Critiquing other writers will also help you focus on the strengths and weaknesses of your own writing. That's why workshops are an integral part of this class. Every student will learn how to constructively critique each others' features. Before coming to the workshop, you are expected to make written notations on the story and on the evaluation forms, focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of the piece with respect to the quality of the research, clarity, comprehensiveness, creativity, characterization, sense of place, and other storytelling elements. In critiquing the features, you are also expected to ask yourself: Does the lead grab my attention and draw me into the story? Does it relate to the larger theme of the story? You will note the presence or lack of vivid and concrete detail, anecdotes, metaphor, scene setting, dialogue and other devices employed in nonfiction storytelling.

Grading:

You are writing one feature story for the class, which will account for three-fourth of your grade. Your features will be evaluated on the quality of the research, reporting and writing. A good editor can immediately detect when stories are thin or underreported. Since your features will be published in the *Denton Record Chronicle*, they must meet the highest standards of journalism. No newspaper, including the *Denton Record Chronicle*, is obliged to publish your features just because you've written them for a class. You will be competing against staff writers and other freelance writers for space. It's the stories that are well researched and well written that get published. All of us – Dawn Cobb, your graduate student mentors and myself – will do our best to see to it that your stories get published.

Deadlines: Missing deadlines is verboten in publishing. You will be expected to bring your best-effort drafts to the workshops and turn in your finished features when due. Don't wait until the last minute before class to print out your drafts and make copies for the workshop. Inevitably, you will encounter problems. Do your printing and copying long before the start of the workshop. If you bring shoddy drafts or no drafts at all to the workshop, this will adversely affect your grade.

Class participation and the quality of your critical response essays will account for one-fourth of your grade. If you're wavering between a "B"

and an “A” and your critical response essays are well written and demonstrate that you’ve learned much about writing from the reading, you will earn an “A.” If you’re wavering between a “B” and an “A” and your critical response essays are weak, you will earn a “B.”

Attendance:

You can not afford to miss this class, especially since some of you will be attending this class just once a week. If you’re not attending class and the workshops, you will not be able to learn and absorb the storytelling techniques that I’ll be teaching in this class. Consequently, attendance at both lectures and workshops is mandatory. If you miss more than two classes during the semester without a doctor’s excuse or my permission, your grade will automatically be reduced from say an “A” to a “B” or from a “B” to a “C.” This is how important I consider attendance.

Internet Research:

The Internet is a good place to start your research, but only to find sources. Sites such as Lexis Nexis archive a huge collection of articles that can be a good starting point in the research. Lexis Nexis can be accessed through the UNT Library Web site under Electronic Resources.

Web sites may not be used as source material.

Email interviews are not ideal, not at all. Yet more and more journalists are conducting interviews via e-mail. I don’t have a problem using e-mail to verify or seek some additional information that wasn’t covered in the original interview or interviews. But if a source will only grant an interview through email, I suggest finding another source. If you feel that source is crucial to the story, discuss the problem with Dawn, a TA or myself.

Plagiarism and Accuracy:

Plagiarism is literary theft. Plagiarism and falsifying stories are the two most serious offenses in journalism, and have ruined the careers of otherwise promising writers and journalists. Jason Blair of the New York Times is the latest example. The minimum punishment in this class for such cheating will be an F for the assignment in which the offense occurred. The offense will also be reported immediately to the department administration for possible further disciplinary action. In the professional world, a single incident of plagiarism can cost you a job -- if not a career.

You are responsible for making copies of all your work and saving all edited copies of your work that have been returned to you.

Your work must also be accurate. Make sure you check every name, fact, quote in your notes against what appears in your features. You should also double check any editing changes made by your editors, including the graduate student who will serve as your immediate editors. If an editor inadvertently makes an error in your copy during the editing process, make sure it gets fixed before it gets into the newspaper or magazine. For accuracy sake, therefore, you should ask to see your features after they've been edited by the paper's copy desk before they're published. Careless editing mistakes can and do happen.

Since some of the features you write for the Denton Record Chronicle and for other newspapers and magazines will be published after you leave this class, you will be required to list your sources, their titles and phone numbers where they can be reached at the bottom of every story you write, including first drafts.

Disabilities Accommodation:

If you require special accommodations, contact me or the Office of Disability Accommodation as early in the term as possible so arrangements can be made to support your needs.

Prerequisite Course Requirements

Each semester, you'll need to print your official transcript, highlighting all of the journalism courses that you have taken. You'll use this transcript to obtain codes in the journalism office before registering for classes.

By registering for this course, you are stating that you have taken the required pre-requisite course(s) of _____. If the instructor later determines that you have not taken and passed these requirements, then you may be dropped at any point in the semester.

The Department of Journalism will no longer allow students to take a course more than twice. Once you have waited 12 months after receiving a D or F in a course twice, you may make an appeal to the professor teaching the course to be allowed to enroll a third time.

