

## MEJO 790.1 Syllabus

“Narrative Non-Fiction/Creative Non-Fiction Storytelling”

Spring 2020

Tue, Thurs, 11:00-12:15 am; Carroll Hall 340A

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How do you hit a moving target? This is one of the most essential questions facing storytelling today in the new media age. Storytelling is a moving target of different platforms, different forms of storytelling, different tools, different levels of compensation, different economic models even, all in motion and none stationary long enough to really capture a sense of how to hit the gold. But like the archer eyeing a swift target, discipline is key to the craft, knowledge is important, consultation with experts essential, apprenticeship desired, and, of course, experience is all. In an age when telling stories jumps from one platform to another, when everyone is searching for firm ground to plant a career on, what is clear is that some covenants still hold true: compelling writing, excellent reporting, a mastery of storytelling, and a genuine voice all apply. Once upon a time, a magazine story had its format, a news feature rules, a documentary a destination. Today in the digital age, each of these forms of story can be considered to be fluid. But mastery of any artistic craft requires a solid foundation in traditional styles before breaking them into something new. The musician must learn of keys, notes, sound and rhythm, before fully comprehending music. Instruments may change but music remains the same. A true master of storytelling can tell stories using any platform.

So, consider this class a music class in developing music and sound that is pleasing and informative to the ear. No matter what instrument you play, the lessons learned here will be applicable to all forms of storytelling. But there is one caveat to this class. All stories must be based in truth. Truth, like our profession, is itself a moving target. John McPhee calls this style of storytelling, “the literature of fact.” We will seek to write non-fiction using the techniques of the fictionist. We will tell stories of impact grounded in truths and pleasing to read.

You will be finding your own stories in this class and I will push you to get outside your own comfort zone when looking and finding stories. Get used to that. There will be flexibility in the syllabus but I also want you to hit your deadlines and finish stories. We will read long-form stories in this class and discuss them, structure, style, composition, literary tools used, reporting and other methods used to produce stunning narrative non-fiction pieces. Discussion of these stories is important in learning how they are crafted. We will also listen to radio. Radio is an important and guiding form of storytelling and we’ll use it in this class so be prepared to listen to podcasts and other shows that tell stories. Documentaries are also on the docket in this class.

Consider that this class will be divided into thirds but not necessarily graded evenly. One third of the class will be class participation and YOU WILL comment, critique, share your thoughts and opinions with others in the class, and analyze the stories featured and how they were crafted and what they did to make them interesting or successful. ATTENDANCE is important for this third.

Another third of the class will be devoted to your own stories. In this class, we will work on two short pieces we can work together on in class and workshop, and one longer narrative, magazine non-fiction piece.

The final third of the class will be focused on an embedded narrative experience that you are writing from within—the perspective closer to the main subject or topic or event or experience than reporting and interviewing. You will be INSIDE the story to show us the story through writing.

Class participation and attendance will be 20 percent of your grade.

Stories in class will be 50 percent of your grade.

Final story will be 30 percent of your grade.

Reading Material to purchase or find:

#### Books & Book Excerpts

1. The John McPhee Reader—John McPhee
2. Longitude—Davo Sobel
3. The Year of Magical Thinking—Joan Didion
4. The Art of Memoir—Mary Karr
5. A Home on the Field—Paul Cuadros
6. The Heart that Bleeds—Alma Guillermoprieto

#### Magazine Articles

1. Frank Sinatra Has a Cold—Gay Talese--Esquire
2. The Case for Reparations—Ta-Neishi Coates—The Atlantic
3. In Cold Blood—Truman Capote—The New Yorker
4. Other magazine articles as they come up in class

#### Podcasts

1. Crimetown: Mayor Buddy Cianci—Parts 1-4
2. Mogul: The Life and Death of Chris Lighty—Parts 1-3.
3. The Moth: You select stories to listen for class

## Writings:

1. Two short features of 1,500 words to be workshopped in class. We will share these collages in class and read them aloud. Reading aloud is important in storytelling. **MUST HAVE AT LEAST FOUR HUMAN SOURCES**
  - a. Profile of a character
  - b. Story where the description of a scenes is important or crafted
2. One long-narrative of 2,500 words.
  - a. Story can focus on anything, news feature, profile, social justice issue, travel piece, investigative, all forms are open but must tell a story in a narrative form using literary devices. **MUST HAVE AT LEAST SIX HUMAN SOURCES**
3. Your final embedded story. 3,000-5,000 words. **MUST HAVE AT LEAST EIGHT HUMAN SOURCES**

## What You Will Learn from this Class:

You will learn how to better compose and finish a long-form story or feature.

You will learn how to open a long-form story that attracts a reader or editor.

You will learn how to better craft a nut graph that informs the reader and editor what the story is all about.

You will learn how to better characterize sources, characters in your stories, describe them, judge them, capture them and convey that to readers.

You will learn how to “show” more and “tell” less in your writing.

You will learn different styles of features and crafting them for certain publications.

You will learn how to better structure a long-form story, organize it, and have it engage a reader’s interest over a longer period of time.

You will learn how to become a better writer and reporter.

## Discussion:

Among some of the topics that we will cover are:

Story Ideas: Where to find them

Writing Nut Graphs and why

Seven Feature Types

Feature Writing Structure and Leads

How to Write an Excellent Query Letter and Land a Paid Assignment

Writing in the First Person  
Sections and Endings  
Storytelling and Narrative Non-Fiction  
Narrative Non-Fiction Journalism  
Interviewing for the Narrative  
Reporting for Narrative  
Researching for Narrative  
Participatory Journalism  
Developing Ideas for a Big Story  
Interviewing techniques for Long Form Narrative  
Choosing the Best Words  
Visual Writing  
The Angle, Unity and Transitions  
Transportation: Taking the Reader to a New Place  
Transformation: Characters, Story, and Readers Transformed  
Reworking a story.  
Freelance reporting & writing

#### Feature Story Assignment Format:

All stories must focus on a topic, person or theme OUTSIDE the university. This means NO stories on student organizations, student events, student shows or performances, and NO PROFILES involving STUDENTS. No stories on family members unless cleared by the instructor. No stories on students traveling abroad, their volunteer work, etc. Topics that touch on the university must be cleared PRIOR to being turned in. No exceptions.

Please place your name, due date, and the category of your feature in the upper left-hand corner of the page. Put the approximate number of words in the upper right-hand corner.

Each story should have an interesting title. A good title or headline helps sharpen the focus of the feature and forces the writer to decide what the story is really about. The title should be about halfway down the first page. Byline goes below the title.

#### Grading Stories and Requirements:

All stories are to be written in AP Style. This is the school's general style and all students adhere to its principles and codes. Please incorporate it into your stories. Stories will be graded on style and grammar, structure, and reporting.

## Schedule and Deadlines:

### Papers & Final Exam:

1. January 23<sup>rd</sup> Draft due on first short narrative—read in class. Workshop
2. January 30<sup>th</sup> Final Draft due on first short narrative—read in class.
3. February 13<sup>th</sup> Draft due on second short narrative—read in class. Workshop
4. February 27<sup>th</sup> Final Draft due on second short narrative—read in class.
5. March 6<sup>th</sup> —March 16<sup>th</sup> SPRING BREAK
6. March 26<sup>th</sup> Final Draft due on first long narrative—share in class.
7. April 9<sup>th</sup> Proposal for Embedded Story Due—share in class.
8. April 23<sup>rd</sup> Final Draft due on Embedded Narrative Story—Last day of class.
9. April 29<sup>th</sup> FINAL EXAM, Noon, 340A.

### Readings & Discussions:

1. Read Gay Talese: Frank Sinatra Has a Cold—Esquire
  - a. Discuss Jan 16<sup>th</sup>
2. Read Truman Capote: In Cold Blood—The New Yorker
  - a. Discuss Jan 23<sup>rd</sup>
3. Read John McPhee: The John McPhee Reader
  - a. Discuss “Travels in Georgia,” Jan 30<sup>th</sup>
4. Listen to Crimetown podcast—Discuss favorite story from site. Chapters 1-4; Feb 6
5. Listen to Mogul podcast—Discuss favorite story from site. Chapters 1-4; Feb 13
6. Listen to Moth Radio Hour—select favorite story—discuss in class; Feb 20
7. Read Ta-Nehisi Coates: The Case for Reparations—The Atlantic
  - a. Discuss Feb 27<sup>th</sup>
8. Read Alma Guillermoprieto: The Heart That Bleeds, Lima articles, Medellin
  - a. Discuss March 5<sup>th</sup>
9. Read Dava Sobel: Longitude: The True Story of the Lone Genius Who Solved the Greatest Mystery of His Time.
  - a. Discuss March 19<sup>st</sup>
10. Read Mary Karr: The Art of Memoir
  - a. Discuss March 26<sup>th</sup>
11. Read Joan Didion: The Year of Magical Thinking
  - a. Discuss April 9<sup>th</sup>
12. Read Paul Cuadros: A Home on the Field
  - a. Discuss April 16<sup>th</sup>
13. Watch Paul Cuadros: Los Jets documentary television series
  - a. Discuss April 21-23<sup>rd</sup>

### Discussions and Readings:

See calendar for semester. Will hand out to class on first day. Calendar may change depending on stories as they come up during the semester.

### Honor Code:

I expect that each student will conduct himself or herself within the guidelines of the University honor system (<http://honor.unc.edu>). All academic work should be done with the high levels of honesty and integrity that this University demands. You are expected to produce your own work in this class. If you have any questions about your responsibility or your instructor's responsibility as a faculty member under the Honor Code, please see the course instructor or Senior Associate Dean Charlie Tuggle, or you may speak with a representative of the Student Attorney Office or the Office of the Dean of Students.

### Seeking Help:

If you need individual assistance, it's your responsibility to meet with the instructor. If you are serious about wanting to improve your performance in the course, the time to seek help is as soon as you are aware of the problem – whether the problem is difficulty with course material, a disability, or an illness.

### Diversity:

The University's policy on Prohibiting Harassment and Discrimination is outlined in the 2011-2012 Undergraduate Bulletin <http://www.unc.edu/ugradbulletin/>. UNC is committed to providing an inclusive and welcoming environment for all members of our community and does not discriminate in offering access to its educational programs and activities on the basis of age, gender, race, color, national origin, religion, creed, disability, veteran's status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

### Special Accommodations:

If you require special accommodations to attend or participate in this course, please let the instructor know as soon as possible. If you need information about disabilities visit the Accessibility Services website at <https://accessibility.unc.edu/>

### Accreditation:

The School of Journalism and Mass Communication's accrediting body outlines a number of values you should be aware of and competencies you should be able to demonstrate by the time you graduate from our program. Learn more about them here:

<http://www2.ku.edu/~acejmc/PROGRAM/PRINCIPLES.SHTML#vals&comps>

No single course could possibly give you all of these values and competencies; but collectively, our classes are designed to build your abilities in each of these areas. In this class, we will address a number of the values and competencies, with special emphasis on the bullet dots under "Professional values and competencies" in the link above and the highlighted bullet points below.

- Understand and apply the principles and laws of freedom of speech and press as well as receive instruction in and understand the range of systems of freedom of expression around the world, including the right to dissent, to monitor and criticize power, and to assemble and petition for redress of grievances;
- Demonstrate an understanding of the history and role of professionals and institutions in shaping communications;
- Demonstrate an understanding of gender, race ethnicity, sexual orientation and, as appropriate, other forms of diversity in domestic society in relation to mass communications;
- Demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of peoples and cultures and of the significance and impact of mass communications in a global society;
- Understand concepts and apply theories in the use and presentation of images and information;
- Demonstrate an understanding of professional ethical principles and work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity;
- Think critically, creatively and independently;
- Conduct research and evaluate information by methods appropriate to the communications professions in which they work;
- Write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communications professions, audiences and purposes they serve;
- Critically evaluate their own work and that of others for accuracy and fairness, clarity, appropriate style and grammatical correctness;
- Apply basic numerical and statistical concepts;
- Apply tools and technologies appropriate for the communications professions in which they work.