

Feature Writing (JOU 3308 & MMC 6936)

Syllabus
Spring 2007

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Office Hours	One hour before each class and by appointment		

Texts

Various feature articles from current media.

Description

The goal of this course is to offer students practical instruction and intensive editorial guidance as they learn to write compelling and publishable feature pieces for magazines and newspapers. Students are expected to produce high quality and well documented articles that show a mastery of attribution, organization, style and other basic journalism skills.

This is largely a hands-on course, built around real-to-life editorial meetings, discussion of story ideas, query letters to potential publishers, assignments, on-the-street interviews and reporting, collegial discussion about your works-in-progress and reading the works of practicing feature writers. In terms of audience, we will be writing for an imaginary magazine called Florida Features. Please see guidelines at the end of this syllabus.

The approach of this course is to put depth before breadth. Rather than write a flurry of short pieces, we will go into great depth in two. That is, each of you will produce two features of about 3,000 words.

In addition to the writing and reporting, we will have several other practical assignments.

Supplemental reading

Reading assignments from current media will be distributed in class or posted on Blackboard (Course Documents).

Supplemental Reading

As you study the required readings, please try to answer the following questions (at a minimum) and be prepared to discuss in class:

What is the lead, nut graf and hook (if present)?

What is the narrative voice?

What is the tone and how, specifically, has the tone been achieved?

How is the article organized or structure?
What sources are used?
What types of transitions are used?
Is there a plot, and if so, what is it?
Is there suspense and, if so, how exactly is this created?
Are universal values conveyed by the story?
What is the conclusion to the piece and what is achieved by it?

2) Those who wish may write query letters to accompany your feature stories.

Evaluation

Each story will account for 30 percent of your grade. Twenty (20) percent will be based on class participation and attendance. You will have an option for the final 20 percent of your grade. You may write a query letter and do a market "market analysis" for your story; or you may post a 500 word blog on some aspect of feature writing. Your post should be skills-related; that is, offer advice or raise a technical or nuts-and-bolts question how a feature-writing problem you are facing. We will discuss the detailed requirements for both of these assignments (you must choose one) in class.

Your choice of subjects will be guided by the editorial guidelines at the end of this syllabus. Your first story may be wide-ranging within the limits of our editorial guidelines. For your second feature, please limit yourself to reporting on and writing about an aspect of the USFSP neighbor and especially places where the university is engaged in the neighborhood. The Center for Community Engagement on campus and the off-campus Neighborhood News Bureau will be good resources as you go about finding a subject and pitching your story. Please note that there will be \$150.00 awards for the two best feature pieces on this subject.

To better understand how your feature stories will be evaluated, it may help to ask yourselves the following questions based upon your story ideas, your query letters (optional) and your final pieces:

1. Your story ideas: Are your subjects original? If not, do your approaches offer new or fresh perspectives? Do your subjects extend beyond traditional topics to include disadvantaged populations or others whose stories or problems are rarely told? Are your topics significant? Do your subjects reflect universal themes? What, exactly, is the argument, either implicit or explicit?
2. Query letter (optional): How well do your letters justify the need for such an article? Do you convincingly explain why readers would want to read about the topics? Do your letters clearly express your ideas in organized ways? Are your arguments substantive and carefully researched? Can you deliver on your promise for the pieces you describe?
3. Final features: Do the pieces work? Are they well organized? Do you have sufficient information and number and quality of sources? Are your quotes telling? Is the piece informative? Do you make a salient point? Do your stories have depth and verve? Are they clearly written, mostly free of typos, misspellings or grammatical errors? Have you generated original information about your subject or do you rely on second-hand sources?

Anticipated Outcomes

By the end of this course, each student will have demonstrated in his or her feature writing fluency with the following:

- the angle, lead and hook
- the difference between a hard news and feature-approach to a story or blend of each
- traditional types of feature articles (anecdotal, personal profile, etc.)
- the use of various types of transitions
- the proper use of quotations
- tone and points of view, including first person
- interviewing techniques
- the use of various sources of information and the advantages and drawbacks of each
- how to outline a story
- various means of organizing information in a feature piece
- the purpose of drafts
- an ability to structurally and thematically analyze the writing of others in order to learn new techniques, approaches and skills.

Graduate Students

In addition, graduate students are expected to undertake the following assignments:

1. Each graduate will individually edit and critique one of each undergraduate writing assignment. In other words, please chose the story of one other student (your choice), edit the piece, and then post in the Digital Dropbox. Please title your file with your name and graduate edit 1 or graduate edit 2. We'll discuss this further in class.
2. Each graduate student will compile throughout this course a list of specific literary techniques (metaphors, analogies, foreshadowing, etc.), with examples, encountered in your reading, research or that you came up with in your own writing.
3. Each graduate student will undertake the structural analysis and critique of two articles posted on Blackboard or from your own reading. You may choose the articles for these critiques.

Please try to answer the following questions when you analyze your stories:

Please answer the following questions when you analyze the story:

What is the lead, nut graf and hook (if present)?
 What is the narrative voice?
 What is the tone and how, specifically, has the tone been achieved?
 How is the article organized?
 What sources are used?
 What types of transitions are used?
 Is there a plot, and if so, what is it?
 Is there suspense and, if so, how exactly is this created?
 What is the conclusion to the piece and what is achieved by it?

Communication

The unfolding of every class is a new evolutionary process, and there's no way to accurately plan all the details in advance. So please be prepared for some course corrections along the way. Many of these suggestions for improvement will come from you.

Although I'll try to always make myself available to you in person, much of our communication outside of class will be electronic. We'll update the online version of this syllabus (posted on Blackboard) as needed. Information will be sent to your USF email address. The class calendar, which will evolve depending upon the pace of the class, will also be posted on Blackboard. Please check it regularly. We will also use the Course Documents feature of Blackboard.

Attendance

Late assignments will result in automatic reduction in your grade. Your articles must be posted in the Digital Dropbox of Blackboard by 5 p.m. on the date due.

Plagiarism or Dishonest Reporting

The use of another's material without attribution or the fictionalization of sources or other material constitute grounds for failing this course.

Course Schedule

Week	Topic	Required Reading (Posted on Blackboard)
Jan 9	Introduction; discuss editorial guidelines.	
Jan 11	Pitch story ideas; assignments	Discussion: What Makes a Good Feature Article (cont'd)? What are the standard types of feature stories? Reading: "Don't Dodge the Drafts"
Jan 16	Pitch story ideas; assignments	"Fight, fight fight," by L. DeGregory
Jan 18	Outlining the feature story.	"Good as Dead"
Jan 23	Discuss outlines-in-progress	No reading

Jan 25	Outline Story # 1 Due	"Those Brilliant Fall Outfits"
Jan 30	Discuss story outlines	Read story outlines
Feb 1	Discuss story outlines	No reading
Feb 6	Discuss stories-in-progress	"Phone Hex"
Feb 8	First Draft Due	No reading
Feb 13	Discuss drafts	"An Autumn Apparition"
Feb 15	Guest: Gary Mormino	Read Mormino articles (to be handed out by Feb. 13)
Feb 20	Final Story # 1 Due Discuss story outlines	Read Articles for Analysis 3 & 4
Feb 22	Pitch story ideas; assignments	"Grizzly Tales"
Feb 27	Pitch story ideas; assignments	No reading
March 1	Discussion final story	Reading to be announced.
March 6	Open Discussion	Reading to be announced.
March 8	Outline Story # 2 Due	"Zepp's Last Stand"
March 20	Discuss stories in progress	Reading to be announced.
March 22	Discuss stories-in-progress	Reading to be announced.
March 27	Discuss stories-in-progress	"A Virus from the Nile"
March 29	Draft Story #2 Due	
April 3	Discuss drafts	To be announced
April 5	Discuss drafts	"Mrs. Kelly's Monster"
April 10	Final Story # 2 Due	
April 12	Discuss final stories	
April 17	Discuss final stories	
April 19	Course Review	
April 24		
April 26		

Florida Features Magazine

A Finger on the Pulse of the Sunshine State

(A ghost publication of Feature Writing 3308)

Contributor's Guidelines

What are we looking for?

Florida Features presents a wide array of stories from our state and was founded on the paradox that the more you go into an individual or local story, the more you discover what is universal.

As our name implies, stories submitted should have a Florida hook. (If the reasons are compelling, exceptions can be made.) Beyond this, the key ingredient to articles in *Florida Features* is that they must tell a good story. We are looking for stories that have unique, intelligent, creative, insightful angles our general audience would find interesting. We are not here simply to pacify or entertain, but to leave our readers with a deeper experience of life's richness and complexity. Although we greatly admire hard news stories and scholarly writing, we publish neither. Creative non-fiction is acceptable, but it must be verifiable, well-substantiated and sourced. We consider much "new journalism" to be the old fiction. *Florida Features* doesn't publish fiction.

There's a Story in Everybody...

In almost all circumstances, stories should include a vibrant human element that the reader can connect with. Stories should tend to be narrative, rather than concept-oriented, and they should resonate with themes common to human experience. We want to reveal human vulnerability by removing the superficial shell that many popular magazines foster. We want our stories to evoke a strong intellectual or emotional response in the reader. Stories should be emotionally satisfying, yet intellectually stimulating. We want stories that transport the reader into the world of the story.

We challenge our writers to defy stereotypes by capturing the uniqueness of every person or situation. Pluck the forbidden fruit; slay the sacred cow. We want details in the story, not just the generalities. Our writers are connoisseurs of the human condition: happiness, heartbreak, hope and despair.

Can I submit my story to other publications even if you run it in Florida Features?

Absolutely. We encourage all contributors to explore other publication markets and find other venues for their work. There are no restrictions as to the market area or format of other publications to which contributors may be interested in submitting their *Florida Features* story. In fact, if contributors are interested and need help exploring potential market options for their work, our editorial staff would be happy to provide assistance.

How do I propose my story to Florida Features?

All contributors are required to attend all editorial meetings. Story proposals and progress will be discussed and assignments will be given at these meetings.

How long should a manuscript run?

As long as it needs to. While some stories require more length than others, manuscripts should generally run no more than 3,000 words. We will also consider photographs (either black and white or color), sidebars, graphs, charts and other supporting elements that enrich your story. Graphic elements should be clearly labeled and submitted as separate files (one element per file) in print-ready format at the same time as the main manuscript. Whether these materials run with the story is up to the discretion of the editorial team and will depend on the availability of space.

How should stories be submitted?

Final manuscripts should be submitted electronically as Microsoft Word documents to Dr. Mark Walters (mjw@mail.usf.edu).

When are stories due?

Timelines and important dates and deadlines are included in the syllabus. It is essential for contributors to have assigned pieces submitted by the deadline.

What if something happens to my sources or if the story just isn't there?

It is normal for unexpected things to happen during the course of a writing project. However, there should be a contingency plan in place and the writer should still be able to meet the deadline. The writer needs to present the problems as soon as possible during the weekly editorial meetings and have a new project to present in the event that life happens.

Does Florida Features follow any particular style?

Regarding story format (i.e. dates, times, titles, etc.), *Florida Features* follows the current AP style guidelines.

Are there specific guidelines regarding research for my story?

Each story must include **at least three** live sources. Sources are considered to be real living people that the writer has contacted directly (in person, telephone or e-mail) and from whom (s)he has received specific information relevant to the story. Other research may be included (e.g. official reports, supplemental documents, etc.) as long as they are properly attributed. All material in a story must be accurate.

In the spring of 2007, we will introduce a special section, or department, of Florida Features known as *In the Neighborhood*. This department will feature stories about specific areas of involvement of the University of South Florida St. Petersburg and Midtown. Each student will be required to do one story for In the Neighborhood (second assignment). The student who writes the best story for this department will receive a prize of \$150.00.