

LITERARY JOURNALISM

First Year Seminar 174-01; 174-02; Fall 2007

Anne Trubek

TTh 11:00-12:15; 3:00-4:15

King 235 (01); 325 (02)

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Office Hours: variable; please see sign-up sheet on office door

Course Description

This course will survey the history of literary journalism and linger upon contemporary American practitioners of this genre. Literary journalism has been variously defined as “the art of fact,” writing which “combines the techniques of the novelist with that of the journalist,” or “making facts dance.” However one defines it, it has a long history--from Daniel DeFoe, James Boswell, Walt Whitman, Jack London, George Orwell and Rebecca West to, more recently, Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, Susan Sontag, David Foster Wallace, John McPhee, Susan Orlean, Lawrence Weschler and Adrian Nicole LeBlanc (to name just a few!). Literary journalism can take on all sorts of guises, such as memoir, investigative reporting, travel writing, literary criticism, sports writing and nature writing. We will read examples of all these, some book-length, some only a few paragraphs long. As we do, we will try to hazard of our definition of the genre. We will pen own examples of literary journalism as well.

Materials

These books are available at the Oberlin Bookstore

George Orwell, *Essays*

Kerrane and Yagoda, *The Art of Fact*

Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*

John McPhee, *The Levels of the Game*

William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*

Course Requirements

Course Goals: To receive credit for this course you must demonstrate the following by the end of the term: 1.) significant improvement in your writing over the course of the semester, 2.) constant, thoughtful, involved participation in all aspects of the class: discussion, workshops, readings and Blackboard posts; and 3.) a basic understanding of the history and form of literary journalism.

Writing: You will write five essays during the course of the semester. Two you will revise before they are graded (#1 and either #2 or #3). You will have the option of revising one essay for an amended grade. Each essay will increase in length, though all are relatively short (do not

be fooled, though: shorter is often harder). Grades are weighted so to assess you upon your progress over the course of the semester: if your writing improves throughout the term, your final grade will reflect that improvement. You will sometimes be required and always encouraged to discuss your ideas for and drafts of your essay with me, a writing associate or classmates.

Note: The writing for this course is somewhat front loaded, meaning you may find yourself with more writing to do in the first half of the semester than the second half. This is intentional: most courses are structured the opposite way; hopefully, this will help you manage your overall course load more effectively.

GRADING:

Revision of Assignment 1:	10%
Revision of Assignment 2 or 3:	15%
Assignment 4:	20%
Assignment 5:	25%
Class Participation:	20%

Class Participation: You are expected, as a member of a small seminar, to contribute to class discussions and workshops. If this requirement will be difficult for you, please see me as early in the semester as possible so we can discuss it.

Blackboard: You will post each assignment to Blackboard by the time class meets. Some of the projects posted to Blackboard may be discussed or revised during our writing workshops.

Attendance: This course is designed to be extremely interactive, because I think the best way to learn how to write well is to be able to read what other people like you are writing, to talk with them about your writing, and to write together. Unfortunately, such a class can only work if we're all always prepared and we're all in class at the same time.

In my experience, students who miss more than four classes are not able to complete the work required to receive credit for the class. Thus, students missing more than four classes will not pass the course. Students missing more than three classes will have their letter grades reduced. Of course, exceptions will be made for emergencies. If you do miss a class, it is your responsibility to find out what was done during the class *from a classmate* and complete all necessary work before the next class meeting.

Late Assignments: Because this course emphasizes frequent writing, all assignments must be turned in on time unless you talk with me in advance of the due date.

Writing Requirement: Students whose writing meets Oberlin's "Criteria for Proficiency" by the end of the course can earn a writing certification credit. However, such certification is *not* automatically awarded for passing the course. Please talk with me individually about any concerns you may have about writing proficiency.

SYLLABUS

Week 1

- Sept. 4 Introduction
- Sept. 6 What is Literary Journalism?

Readings: Ben Yagoda, "Preface," *Art of Fact*; Kevin Kerrane, "Making Facts Dance" *Art of Fact*; William Zinsser, "Nonfiction as Literature" *On Writing Well*; Handouts

Week 2

- Sept. 11 Discussion of Readings (tba)
- Sept. 13 **NO CLASS (Rosh Hashanah)**

Assignment #1 Due. Post to Blackboard By Class time

Define literary journalism. You must provide multiple views of the term, based upon course readings and/or outside research, and offer your understanding of it. 500-750 words

Week 3

- Sept. 18 Workshop: Clarity of Expression
- Reading:* Zinsser, Part I, 3-49; Writing About Places
- Sept. 20 Introduction to Unit II: People, Places and Things

Revision of Assignment #1 Due

Week 4

- Sept. 25 Discussion of Readings from *Art of Fact* (tba)
- Sept. 27 Discussion of Readings from *Art of Fact* (tba)

Week 5

- Oct. 2 Workshop: Structuring Prose

Assignment #2 Due: Write about someone you have met this month. You may interview this person, include material from other writers (citing them); discuss cultural notions of some aspect of their identity. Include at least one moment that's revealing, such as the way the person eats or talks on the phone. 500 words

Oct. 4 Peer Review

Readings: Zinsser, Part II, 49-95

Week 6

Oct. 9 Discussion of Readings from *Art of Fact* (tba)

Oct. 11 Discussion of Readings from *Art of Fact* (tba)

Assignment #3 Due: Describe Wilder (the student union). You may choose which aspect of the building to describe (you may need to choose one part). Capture some of the scene surrounding it. Find some history of Wilder and include it in your description. 750 words.

Week 7

Oct. 16 Workshop: Voice

Readings: Zinsser, Part IV, 231-261

Oct. 18 Mid-Term Reflections

Revision of either Assignment 2 or 3. Your revision may be up to 750 words

FALL BREAK

Week 8

Oct. 30 Literary Journalism Today

Nov. 1 Discussion of McPhee, *Levels of the Game*

Week 9

Nov. 6 Discussion of McPhee *Levels of the Game*

Nov. 8 Workshop: Pre-Writing, Research, Brainstorming

Week 10

Nov. 13 Discussion of Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*

Nov. 15 Discussion of Fadiman, cont.

Week 11

Nov. 20 Discussion of Fadiman, cont.

Assignment #4 Due: Research a moment in Oberlin's history (it should be very specific—an event, a day, etc.) and rewrite it as a narrative. 1000 words

Nov. 22 **NO CLASS (Thanksgiving)**

Week 11

Nov. 27 Discussion of Orwell (specific essays tba)

Nov. 29 Discussion of Orwell (specific essays tba)

Week 12

Dec. 4 Discussion of Orwell (specific essays tba)

Assignment #5: Write a piece the next issue of a fictional publication called *The Oberlinian*. It should contain a clearly developed point of view. 1250 words.

Dec. 6 Writing Workshop

Dec. 11 Writing Workshop

Dec. 13 Conclusion

Optional: Revision of Assignment 4 or 5

