



Instructional Approach: Journalism 404, also known as Feature Writing, is an upper-level writing course for journalism and public relations majors designed to give fourth-year students an opportunity to move beyond the basics of news writing and explore more in-depth and sophisticated narrative journalism techniques. This course was conceptualized more than 20 years ago, at a time when print journalism was a major focus. I have taught this course twice before, both in a classroom setting and in an online version, in a rather traditional way: lectures, assigned readings/study questions on narrative journalism techniques and evaluations of published magazine stories. Students had three high-stakes story assignments, which were produced in Word doc format and executed in two drafts.

But after attending Backwards By Design, I was inspired by some of the multimedia storytelling methods and exercises Rebecca Baker was using in the English Department. So I created a new title for the course: The Writing Studio: Narrative Journalism in Multimedia Environment. I was lucky to secure an airy seminar room in Academic West, with big windows and views of sky and treetops. My plan was to make the classroom a pleasant and creative space for telling true stories, a place where journalism students can overcome the strictures of hard news reporting and learn to produce well-crafted and meaningful journalism with a unique tone, voice and point of view. Here's how I described the writing studio concept in the syllabus:

Narrative journalism, also known as feature writing, marries the literary techniques of creative writing -- vividly set

scenes, fully described characters, dialogue and cinematic storytelling -- with the discipline and ethics of news reporting.

Narrative journalism goes beyond the formulaic style of the inverted pyramid to a deep, disciplined and meaningful form of storytelling with a distinct [tone](#), [voice](#) and [point of view](#). Narrative storytellers immerse themselves in the lives of their subjects. They write with passion and precision about the whole range of human experience, maintaining appropriate journalistic rigor, respect for the truth, fairness and balance. They are multimedia storytellers, adding value to their work with maps, links, photos, videos and audio.

This course, which meets in AW 403, creates an airy and relaxed studio environment for you to sharpen your verbal storytelling and multimedia skills in a supportive and collegial environment. Ungraded exploratory writing exercises, designed to allow you to discover your unique narrative voice, are part of each class, so your attendance is vital to your success. You'll also learn the basics of how to pitch and sell your work as a freelancer in a multimedia marketplace. **Bring your laptop to every class – or check one out from ATUS!**

Research Question:

What happens to student learning when I structure the entire course around these two threshold concepts:

1. The Writers Studio Format, in which brief mini-lectures are combined with low-stakes, in-class writing exercises, read-aloud sessions, peer reviews, roundtable discussions, videos of famous writing coaches and accomplished narrative journalists. Outside of class, students were expected to report and write three high-stakes multimedia stories: a travel/adventure/discovery story, a personal story, first-person essay or review and a long-form work of immersive journalism, which would entail intensive reporting and interviews executed over eight weeks.
2. Multimedia Storytelling, abandoning the traditional method of having students produce text-only stories in Word doc format in favor of multimedia stories produced in draft form on the website [Medium.com](#)., organically weaving photos, videos, maps, charts, Tweets, podcasts and other interactive elements into their stories. My article: [Using Medium As a Writing Platform: A New Tool for Multimedia Storytelling](#) explained to the students on the first day of class why and how we would be using this format.

Gathering Evidence: What Worked, What Didn't

1. Writing Exercises

Here's a link to a series [of writing exercises](#) I developed for this class. Each class featured some kind of exercise, keyed to literary theory, narrative journalism techniques, tone, voice, narrative arc, dealing with writer's block, organizational issues, etc. Some were more successful than others, but the students found these ungraded exercises to be creative and fun. The most successful: mapping out the narrative arc of their stories on paper, using shapes and images rather than words; freewriting exercises like "The Petting Zoo," using Google News Lab tools to create maps and charts. They loved the online writing diagnostic tools like [Writers Diet](#) and [Slickwrite](#), which helped them diagnose problematic writing patterns. One smashing success was an exercise that I asked them to do after a peer review session: write a letter to your reader – and really try to visualize who that reader is – explaining what you tried to accomplish with this story, what its shortcomings were and what you would include in the story if you had two more days to write it. When we went around the table and they read their letters aloud, astonishing discoveries were made that were later incorporated in the final

drafts. What definitely didn't work (and I was surprised at this) was an exercise in character creation in which the students were asked to write a "bio-poem" about a character in their story, creating a haiku-like poem in response to a series of short prompts. They hated it. Videos of writers and writing coaches were less successful than I thought they might be, especially when the writers were older: Susan Orlean, for example, had no appeal to the students; writing coach Lee Gutkind was similarly disappointing. But I think they did enjoy hearing from a younger generation of narrative journalists: Eli Saslow, Pulitzer Prize-winning writer for the Washington Post, Rukmini Calimachi, who covers ISIS for the New York Times, and Isabel Wilkerson, author of "The Warmth of Other Suns," a chronicle of the Great Migration of African Americans from the Jim Crow South were inspiring.

2. Peer Reviews

At first, I let the 12 students in the class organize their own peer review partnerships, forming groups of 3 or 4, reading each other's stories and then discussing. I found that like-minded students chose each other. For example, four of the students were editors on the Western Front, whose hard news format is what I was attempting to move them beyond were just reinforcing their own problematic writing patterns. The really strong writers tended to choose each other for peer edits. By mid-quarter I shifted strategy, and paired up strong writers with weaker ones. This mentoring-style peer review worked much more effectively and it is something I will continue to do in all my writing classes.

3 Read-aloud sessions

I didn't discover this until late into the quarter, but a very effective diagnostic exercise involved placing the students into groups of two. They were asked to leave the classroom, find a quiet spot in the lounge area of Academic West and read their stories aloud to one another. Listening to a colleague's story rather than reading it was beneficial for both. If their phrasing was inelegant or ungrammatical, or if transitions were too abrupt, it was immediately apparent. Students could identify problematic passages and correct them easily. I will definitely do more of this in the future.

4 Telling True Stories

Our text for this class was "[Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writer's Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University](#)." It's a series of essays by prominent journalists who explore the art and craft of narrative storytelling. The point of this class is to create an environment in which students, like the contributors to our text, are able to tell meaningful stories in an authentic way, in a voice, tone and point of view that is uniquely theirs. That meant that I established early on that what happens in the classroom stays in the classroom – and that when personal revelations are made, the privacy of all should be respected. The range and sensitivity of the work these students produced was simply astounding to me. Many wrote about loss – of a parent, of a sibling, of friends who died in the Marysville school shooting. Some wrote about self-discovery, about endurance. They wrote with an acute and poignant sense of the beauty, the mystery and the difficulty of life. Some of these students were natural-born writers who blossomed in what I hope they felt was a safe environment. Others

who were shy and less confident struggled to put the techniques of immersive journalism into practice. And there were a couple of students who were not 100 percent engaged, which was reflected in their final grades.

5 Multimedia storytelling on Medium

The shift from writing text-only stories in Word doc format to multimedia stories on Medium.com was the most fruitful and effective teaching method I used in this course. Up to now, writing in the Journalism Department has been a mainly print-oriented exercise. While students were encouraged in many classes to think about multimedia elements, they tended to be an afterthought – a few notes at the end of the story. Inserting multimedia elements was a task that would fall to some unspecified “other person,” rather than the writers themselves – so there was little real learning on that score. Students become expert at taking their own photos, developing maps, creating podcast versions of their stories and inserting videos into the narrative.

Using Medium as a writing platform meant that multimedia elements became the prime responsibility of the writer and were woven organically into the storytelling. Because of the potential for legal issues such as libel or invasion of privacy, students submitted their stories in draft format only. They had the option to publish them to the web if they chose, with the understanding that the story must be fully fact-checked and that they would be solely responsible for the content.

Here are some examples of multimedia storytelling on the Medium platform:

[Fallen is Not Forgotten](#): *A year and a half after the death of Washington State Trooper Brent Hanger, his daughter begins her journey to be a Trooper herself*

[A Very Short Trip](#): *A journey of discovery, from Washington to the Bay Area*

[The Infinite Oval](#): *On the ultimate proving ground, Western Washington University athletes contemplate life after competition*

[An Imperfect Storm](#): *Dissecting a storm that never happened*

[Marysville's Misery](#): *I graduated from Marysville-Pilchuck High School in 2009. This is my reflection of the tragedy that took place five years later, when a student shot himself and five of his classmates*

