

# JOURNALIST'S RESOURCE

Knowledge-based reporting

## Feature writing: A syllabus

*“Reporting and writing can’t be divorced. All the instruction available on how to bang sentences together gracefully (and there’s a lot of it) will produce nothing but glitz if the right material, and a pleasing variety of it, is missing.”*

— William Blundell, *The Art and Craft of Feature Writing*

### Course description

The best journalism engages as it informs. When articles or scripts succeed at this, they often are cast as what is known as *features* or contain elements of a story. This course, written for [Journalist's Resource](#), will teach students how to write compelling feature articles, substantive non-fiction stories that look to a corner of the news and illuminate it, often in human terms. Like news, features are built from facts. Nothing in them is made up or embellished. But in features, these facts are imbedded in or interwoven with scenes and small stories that show rather than simply tell the information that is conveyed. Features are grounded in time, in place and in characters who inhabit both. Often features are framed by the specific experiences of those who drive the news or those who are affected by it. They are no less precise than news. But they are less formal and dispassionate in their structure and delivery. This class will foster a workshop environment in which students can build appreciation and skill sets for this particular journalistic craft.

### Course objective

To teach students how to interest readers in significant, research-based subjects by writing about them in the context of non-fiction stories that have characters, show development and follow a structural arc from beginning to end.

### Learning objectives

- To explore the qualities of storytelling and how they differ from news.
- To build a vocabulary of storytelling.
- To apply that vocabulary to critiquing the work of top-flight journalists.
- To introduce a writing process that carries a story from concept to publication.
- To introduce tools for finding and framing interesting features.
- To sharpen skills at focusing stories along a single, clearly articulated theme.
- To evaluate the importance of backgrounding in establishing the context, focus and sources of soundly reported stories.
- To analyze the connection between strong information and strong writing.
- To evaluate the varied types of such information in feature writing.
- To introduce and practice skills of interviewing for story as well as fact.
- To explore different models and devices for structuring stories.

- To conceive, report, write and revise several types of feature stories.
- To teach the value of “listening” to the written word.
- To learn to constructively critique and be critiqued.
- To examine markets for journalism and learn how stories are sold.

### Suggested reading

- *The Art and Craft of Feature Writing*, William Blundell, Plume, 1988 (Note: While somewhat dated, this book explicitly frames a strategy for approaching the kinds of research-based, public affairs features this course encourages.)
- *Writing as Craft and Magic* (second edition), Carl Sessions Stepp, 2007, Oxford University Press.
- *On Writing Well* (30th anniversary edition), William Zinsser, Harper Paperbacks, 2006.
- *The Associated Press Stylebook 2010*, Associated Press, Basic Books, 2010.

### Recommended reading

- *America’s Best Newspaper Writing*, edited by Roy Peter Clark and Christopher Scanlan, Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2006.
- *Writing for Story*, Jon Franklin, Penguin, 1986.
- *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers’ Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University*, edited by Mark Kramer and Wendy Call, Plume, 2007.
- *The Journalist and the Murderer*, Janet Malcolm, Vintage, 1990.
- *Writing for Your Readers*, Donald Murray, Globe Pequot, 1992.

### Assignments

Students will be asked to write and report only four specific stories this semester, two shorter ones, one at the beginning of the semester and one at the end, and two longer ones, a feature looking behind or beyond a news development, and an institutional or personal profile.

They will, however, be engaged in substantial writing, much of it focused on applying aspects of the writing-process method suggested herein. Throughout the class, assignments and exercises will attempt to show how approaching writing as a process that starts with a story’s inception can lead to sharper story themes, stronger story reporting and more clearly defined story organization. As they report and then revise and redraft the semester’s two longer assignments, students will craft theme or focus statements, write memos that help the class troubleshoot reporting weaknesses, outline, build interior scenes, workshop drafts and workshop revisions. Finally, in an attempt to place at least one of their pieces in a professional publication, an important lesson in audience and outlet, the students will draft query letters.

## Methodology

This course proceeds under the assumption that students learn to report and write not only through practice (which is essential), but also by deconstructing and critiquing award-winning professional work and by reading and critiquing the work of classmates.

These workshops work best when certain rules are established:

- Every student will read his or her work aloud to the class at some point during the semester. It is best that these works be distributed in advance of class.
- Every student should respond to the work honestly but constructively. It is best for students to first identify what they like best about a story and then to raise questions and suggestions.
- All work will be revised after it is workshopped.

## Weekly schedule and exercises (13-week course)

We encourage faculty to assign students to read on their own at least the first 92 pages of William Zinsser's *On Writing Well* before the first class. The book is something of a contemporary gold standard for clear, consistent writing and what Zinsser calls the contract between writer and reader.

The assumption for this syllabus is that the class meets twice weekly.

## Week 1: What makes feature stories different?

### Class 1: News reports versus stories

The words “dispassionate,” “factual” and “front-loaded” might best describe the traditional news story. It is written to convey information quickly to the hurried reader. Features, on the other hand, are structured and told so that readers engage in and experience a story — with a beginning, middle and end — even as they absorb new information. It is features that often are the stories emailed to friends or linked on their Facebook pages. Nothing provides more pleasure than a “good read,” a story that goes beyond basic information to transport audiences to another place, to engage an audience in others’ lives, to coax a smile or a tear.

This class will begin with a discussion of the differences in how journalists approach both the reporting and writing of features. In news, for example, reporters quote sources. In features, they describe characters, sometimes capturing their interaction through dialogue instead of through disembodied quotes. Other differences between news and story are summarized eloquently in the essays “Writing to Inform, Writing to Engage” and “Writing with ‘Gold Coins’ ” on pages 302 to 304 of Clark and Scanlan’s *America’s Best Newspaper Writing*. These two essays will be incorporated in class discussion.

The second part of the introductory class will focus on writing as a continuum that begins with the inception of an idea. In its cover blurb, William Blundell’s book is described as “a step-by-step guide to reporting and writing as a continuous, interrelated process.”

Notes Blundell: “Before flying out the door, a reporter should consider the range of his story, its central message, the approach that appears to best fit the tale, and even the tone he should take as a storyteller.” Such forethought defines not only how a story will be reported and written but the scope of both. This discussion will emphasize that framing and focusing early allows a reporter to report less broadly and more deeply, assuring a livelier and more authoritative story.

READING (assignments always are for the next class unless otherwise noted):

- Blundell, Chapter 1
- Clark/Scanlan, “The Process of Writing and Reporting,” pages 290-294.

ASSIGNMENT: Before journalists can capture telling details and create scenes in their feature stories, they need to get these details and scenes in their notebooks. They need, as Blundell says, to be keen observers “of the innocuous.” In reporting news, journalists generally gather specific facts and elucidating quotes from sources. Rarely, however, do they paint a picture of place, or take the time to explore the emotions, the motives and the events that led up to the news. Later this semester, students will discuss and practice interviewing for story. This first assignment is designed to make them more aware of the importance of the senses in feature reporting and, ultimately, writing.

Students should read the lead five paragraphs of Hal Lancaster’s piece on page 56 of Blundell and the lead of Blundell’s own story on page 114. They should come prepared to discuss what each reporter needed to do to cast them, paying close attention to those parts based on pure observation and those based on interviewing.

Finally, they should differentiate between those parts of the lead that likely were based on pure observation and those that required interviewing and research. This can be done in a brief memo.

## **Class 2: Building observational and listening skills**

Writing coach Don Fry, formerly of the Poynter Institute, used the term “gold coins” to describe those shiny nuggets of information or passages within stories that keep readers reading, even through sections based on weighty material. A gold coin can be something as simple as a carefully selected detail that surprises or charms. Or it can be an interior vignette, a small story within a larger story that gives the reader a sense of place or re-engages the reader in the story’s characters.

Given the feature’s propensity to apply the craft of “showing” rather than merely “telling,” reporters need to expand their reporting skill set. They need to become keen observers and listeners, to boil down what they observe to what really matters, and to describe not for description’s sake but to move a story forward. To use all the senses to build a tight, compelling scene takes both practice and restraint. It is neither license to write a prose-poem nor to record everything that’s seen, smelled or heard. Such overwriting serves as a neon exit sign to almost any reader. Yet features that don’t take readers to what Blundell calls “street level” lack vibrancy. They recount events and measure impact in the words of experts instead of in the actions of those either affected by policy, events or discovery of those who propel it.

In this session, students will analyze and then apply the skill sets of the observer, the reporter who takes his place as a fly on the wall to record and recount the scene. First students will discuss the passive observation at the heart of the stories assigned above. Why did the writers select the details they did? Are they the right ones? Why or why not?

Then students will be asked to report for about 30 to 45 minutes, to take a perch someplace — a cafeteria, a pool hall, a skateboard park, a playground, a bus stop — where they can observe and record a small scene that they will be asked to recapture in no more than 150 to 170 words. This vignette should be written in an hour or less and either handed in by the end of class or the following day.

Four fundamental rules apply:

1. The student reporters can only write what they observe or hear. They can’t ask questions. They certainly can’t make anything up.
2. The students should avoid all opinion. “I” should not be part of this story, either explicitly or implicitly.
3. The scene, which may record something as slight as a one-minute exchange, should waste no words. Students should choose words and details that show but to avoid words and details that show off or merely clutter.

4. Reporters should bring their lens in tight. They should write, for example, not about a playground but about the jockeying between two boys on its jungle gym.

READING: Blundell, Chapter 1, Stepp, pages 64 to 67. Students will be assigned to read one or more feature articles built on the context of recently released research or data. The story might be told from the perspective of someone who carried out the research, someone representative of its findings or someone affected by those findings. One Pulitzer Prize–winning example is Matt Richtel’s [“Dismissing the Risks of a Deadly Habit,”](#) which began a series for which *The New York Times* won a Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting in 2010. Richtel told of the dangers of cell phones and driving through the experiences of Christopher Hill, a young Oklahoma driver with a clean record who ran a light and killed someone while talking on the phone. Dan Barry’s piece in *The Times*, [“From a Gulf Oyster, a Domino Effect,”](#) tells the story of the BP oil spill and its impact from the perspective of one oysterman, placing his livelihood into the context of those who both service and are served by his boat.

#### ASSIGNMENT:

1. Finish passive observational exercise (see above).
2. Applying Blundell’s criteria in Chapter 1 (extrapolation, synthesis, localization and projection), students should write a short memo that establishes what relationship, if any, exists between the features they were assigned to read and the news or research developments that preceded them. They should consider whether the reporter approached the feature from a particular point of view or perspective. If so, whose? If not, how is the story structured? And what is its main theme? Finally, students should try to identify three other ways feature writers might have framed a story based on the same research.

## Week 2: The crucial early stages: Conceiving and backgrounding the story

### Class 1: Finding fresh ideas

In the first half of class, several students should be asked to read their observed scenes. Writing is meant to be heard, not merely read. After each student reads a piece, the student should be asked what he or she would do to make it better. Then classmates should be encouraged to make constructive suggestions. All students should be given the opportunity to revise.

In the second half of class, students will analyze the origins of the features they were assigned to read. The class might be asked to form teams and to identify other ways of approaching the material thematically by using Blundell's methods of looking at an issue.

Feature writers, the author writes, are expected to find and frame their own ideas.

“The feature writer who doesn't have two or three projects bubbling on his own stove is doing only half a job,” he writes.

Conceiving stories, Blundell notes, involves more than clear and original thought. Reporters need idea files and source files. They need to read prolifically in areas about which they know little. They need to look for areas that are under covered by their publications. They need to walk through their communities with the wonderment of tourists who have just landed in a foreign city.

This degree of organization and engagement assures reporters far greater success in applying some of Blundell's other tools of analysis.

These include:

- Extrapolation — Looking for the “why” or principal cause of a story. After the explosion that killed BP workers and spewed oil into the Gulf of Mexico, some feature stories likely told the dramatic, but relatively narrow, story of the night things went bad. Others, based on much weightier investigation, traced the series of bad decisions BP made that ultimately led to catastrophe. Both, in their way, would have been considered *backgrounders* to the news development.
- Synthesis — Looking for common threads that can broaden a story's impact. Blundell offers the example of a series of mishaps in the city of San Diego that made the city ripe for a feature on its dubious claim to being the American capital of civic embarrassment.



- Localization — Examining big events or developments in smaller ways — either by taking a national or global event and examining its impact within the writer’s local area or by viewing a broad, thematic problem — post-traumatic stress disorder in the military, for example — through the experiences of an individual whose story represents the more universal experience. (In his book, *Writing for Your Readers*, Donald Murray writes: “Most good stories say one thing. They tell the story not of a battle, but of a soldier: they talk not about governance, but a deal; they discuss not a socioeconomic group, but reveal a person and a life.” Blundell writes that it is easier for most feature writers to be miniaturists than muralists.)
- Projection — Looking beyond the news development by writing a story that considers how the news affects a person or group of people. In Richtel’s story about the dangers of cell phones and driving, he builds the story around one young man whose life was shaken when he ran a stop light and took a life while talking on the phone.

Conceiving a story is only the first step. The reporter must go deep to report and write the story well. “To me,” Blundell writes, “the most important part of reporting is knowing what you need to make the story go.”

READING: Blundell Chapter 3 and 4

ASSIGNMENT: Students should either use materials posted on the [Journalist’s Resource](#) website or developed at a research center at their university to identify and background a news or research development that can serve as the basis for developing a unique feature *angle* or approach. This feature should *not* profile, or tell the story of, either of an institution or an individual. Profiles will be assigned later in the semester. Instead students should look for features that either look behind a news development, such as the BP backgrounders described earlier, or features that look at the impact of a news development on those most directly affected by it or those who would be expected to translate it into policy. Students should keep in mind that they are conceiving and finding a thematic thread for a feature, not reporting a policy story filled with expert voices only. For example, if the Department of Defense releases data showing that suicides have increased in the military, the student might propose a feature like one published by *The New York Times* on July 30, 2010. ["Taking Calls From Veterans on the Brink"](#) told the story of those working on a suicide hotline to keep anguished members of the military alive. The stories that grow out of this assignment should be substantial in their research and be worthy of between 1,300 and 1,500 words. They will be due in four weeks (Class 2 or Week 6).

By the second class of Week 3 students will be expected to have identified a topic and a way of approaching it that allows each to:

1. Craft a single-sentence theme statement establishing its focus.
2. Identify and obtain research-based material that will provide a specific contextual foundation for the story.
3. Provide at least four sources, with their contact information, and an explanation of why the student has chosen them.
4. Provide a brief reporting plan.



## **Class 2: The importance of backgrounding (starting the reporting process)**

Too many students mistake reporting for a journalistic version of a police dragnet: They pull in everything they can find and then try to figure out what the story is. Such an approach results in stories riddled with holes and lacking any dominant focus. Reporting always demands lots of legwork. But that legwork must be informed by forethought, which, in turn, is informed by the process of backgrounding. Backgrounding moves a story from the conceptual stage to the point at which a reporter can draw up a well-established working thesis or plan, a focus which, while it might still change, sets the direction of future reporting and writing.

“The good writers I know always do some kind of planning before they report,” writes Blundell.

Part of that planning means to review what’s been written about the topic before, both to find useful information and to see what hasn’t been broached. It means identifying and locating documents to help establish a line of questioning and lend authority to the story. It means identifying different kinds of sources, from the “rabbis,” who point the way but rarely are quoted to “wise men,” who can offer a big picture overview of the landscape; and from authorities who can give the official version of things to what Blundell calls the “street-level” people who live the story and among whom the reporter likely will find a central character.

In this class, students will begin with a discussion of the steps needed to background a story well and then apply those steps to the individual stories they have begun researching. Among the issues that will be discussed are: Where to look for authoritative sources and digital or print documents, how to distinguish between different kinds of sources, and how to use background material to establish a line of questioning, identify potential sources and narrow the story’s focus.

### **READING/ASSIGNMENT:**

1. Blundell, Chapter 2 (with special attention to page 27 to 29) and Stepp, pages 46 to 51. Also read Blundell story on page 114-119. Students should write a brief memo that explains whether they:
  - Agree with Blundell’s assessment of the theme of the story as expressed on page 116
  - Find that the story stays tightly focused on the thematic Blundell describes. In each case, students should explain why they agree or disagree.
2. Continue background work on first feature.

## Week 3: Honing the story's approach

### Class 1: Focus or theme statements

Nearly every effective and interesting story is built around a single, dominant theme, using varied types of material to develop it. Writers who fill stories with exhaustive documentation but fail to establish a clear storyline file copy that reads like a government report. Writers who cobble together a series of colorful scenes that are not connected by a clear story spine run the risk of confusing readers to the point at which they will turn away.

The best features engross or entertain readers as they inform them. They offer content, structure and style, or, as Carl Sessions Stepp writes, “typically ... share the following three virtues: 1. storyline: a special idea 2. Surprise: compelling material and 3. Stylishness: engaging writing.

To arrive at 2 and 3, the writer must first establish 1, the storyline. “A limited tale well told has more impact and persuasiveness than a sweeping story that can’t be adequately illustrated,” Blundell writes.

It is difficult to write that limited tale, however, unless the reporter sets out on a course to report it. That usually means narrowing and sharpening the story’s concept to the point at which the writer can express it in a clear and specific theme or focus statement. (For example, on page 116, Blundell gives this theme statement for the profile he deconstructs in the same chapter: “My theme statement for this story was simple — the life and work of a real cowboy in an age of cowboy hype.”)

Most serious storytellers would agree with Blundell that writing such a theme sentence must precede the bulk of reporting. This does not suggest the journalist embarks on his reporting with a bias. It suggests he is reporting with purpose. If the reporter finds a better story along the way, he can recast the theme statement. But entering the reporting process without one is like running through brambles instead of along a clearly marked path. The reporter who chooses the brambles may still get to the end, but only with multiple nicks and cuts.

As students sharpen their stories’ themes, they should consider some of the questions Blundell raises in Chapter 4 (assigned earlier). They also might ask themselves these questions, among others:

- Is the story’s scope too broad?
- Do I have time to report and write a story of the scale I’m proposing?
- Am I getting down to street level in my reporting?
- Can I establish an element of suspense or anticipation at the outset of the story that isn’t answered until near the end?

- Does something happen in the story? Does something change? (Action often informs character and stories are easier to construct if they arrive at a resolution. In his excellent book on narrative nonfiction, *Writing for Story*, author Jon Franklin notes that the best stories are built around sympathetic characters forced to confront and resolve a conflict or complication in their lives. “A story,” he writes, “consists of a sequence of actions that occur when a sympathetic character encounters a complicating situation that he confronts and solves.”)
- Does the story’s contemporary context or its past make it more interesting to tell?

To help internalize the process of writing theme statements, students can be asked to select an article from the [Journalist’s Resource](#) website, to deconstruct it and to craft a single theme sentence that captures its purpose. They then should compare their efforts, either in small groups or a discussion of the entire class.

DUE: Memo

## **Class 2: Pitching the story**

Students will read their theme or focus statements aloud in class. These will be critiqued by the instructor and class. Using the memos submitted by students, the instructor should work with them to sharpen the focus of their stories and troubleshoot the direction of their reporting.

READING: Blundell, page 95 (four stages), 126 to 140 and 148 to 152; Zinsser, pages 55 to 58; Stepp, 99 to 101 and 149 to 153.

### **ASSIGNMENT:**

1. The first draft of the 1,500-word public affairs feature article described above will be assigned for the second class of Week 5 (in two weeks).
2. Those students with a weak focus statement will be expected to recast them for the following class.
3. Students should come prepared to discuss which lead in Appendix 2 of Blundell’s book they consider most effective and why. They also should consider which ending they consider most effective and why.

## Week 4: Organizing stories

### Class 1: Leads and endings

Journalism textbooks love to categorize lead types. Among the feature leads they'll list are *anecdotal leads*, short vignettes that exemplify or show what the main point of the story will tell; *scene setters*, that paint a picture and create a mood of a place central to a story's central theme; *zingers*, short, sharp leads that pull readers in with a quick turn of phrase or sharp contrast; and *narrative leads*, which foreshadow what's to come and build suspense without giving away the story's ending.

Categories aside, though, every lead serves the same purpose and has the same mission: To engage readers immediately and to do so well enough to keep them reading.

Reporters, particularly those writing for newspapers or websites, don't have the time or space to luxuriate in the scenes they create. They cannot afford to waste space or words. They must, in the words of E.B. White, "make every word tell." This is as true in writing features as in writing news. The forms and style change. The mission remains the same.

In his book, *On Writing Well*, William Zinsser puts it like this: "The most important sentence in any article is the first one. If it doesn't induce the reader to proceed to the second sentence, your article is dead."

He notes that leads must not only force the reader to keep reading but that to do so, each sentence must do "real work." It needs to build on the sentence before, to introduce information even as it entices or draws the reader in.

Leads must do something else: They must be honest. A lead about a shark surfacing a few feet from a swimmer off Cape Cod likely would draw the reader to the next sentence. But if the story had nothing to do with sharks other than they were swimming in the waters near a controversial site where offshore windmills will soon be built, the lead would be deceptive and tangential to the story. A lead must fit the story — in its content, its tone and its direction. Readers will resent the writer who deceives.

The second most important sentence in a good feature is its last. It should leave the reader with a sense of finality or resolution, a strong image, a reminder of the story's main theme. The best endings both surprise and resonate. This is not the long windup of the college English essay. Students are urged to leave out their editorial opinions and to eschew that dreadful term-paper transition: "in conclusion." Instead, the best stories stop, sometimes abruptly, often before the reader is quite ready.

When an opening anecdote or scene introduces a broader theme, the writer often circles back or bookends the story to where it began. Stories that return to where they began offer a sense of symmetry, a sense of completion. Other stories end by looking ahead, to the future. Or, in the case of narrative, they reach the solution readers have been seeking since they were enticed into the story in the opening scene.

The best way to learn to write different kinds of leads and endings is to (a) read many writers and take note of their approaches and (b) to try multiple leads and endings to the same story.

In this session, the class should discuss Blundell's four stages on page 95. The first, "tease me, you devil" is the anecdotal or scene-setter lead of the conventional public affairs feature and, perhaps, the first chapter of the pure narrative. The second stage, "tell me what you're up to" is the *nut graph*, the paragraph or two in traditional features that resolves the anecdote before it by telling what it showed and then, by placing it in broader context. The second stage is a theme or focus statement with a bit more muscle on the bone. The third stage, "I'm from Missouri. You'll have to prove what you just said," is the story's middle, its evidence and its story development, often woven together. And the last, "I'll buy it. Help me remember," is the ending.

In addition to critiquing the leads and endings in Blundell's Appendix B, the class, time permitting, might either evaluate how well one piece meets these four stages and/or recast the lead for one of the stories, a means of matching their wits against a master and also, perhaps, proving to themselves that no story has a single right lead.

READING: Blundell, Chapter 5; Stepp, pages 141 to 149, 182 to 192; 52 to 54

## **Class 2: Managing the middle**

Good organization can't rectify weak content. That's why students should start this class by playing close heed to Blundell's "rule of threes" (page 54), a means of layering strong reporting into story. The author notes that readers need repetition to understand ideas and concepts. But, he adds, that repetition should take different forms. So, for example, if a sentence says the catch of Gulf oystermen has been cut by a third since the BP oil spill, the next sentence should give a specific example, perhaps showing the diminished haul of the story's main character on a specific day. The third sentence might be a salty quote from that main character on how bad things have become.

Fact, followed by example, followed by quote: That is one application of the rule of threes. Working in tandem, these different kinds of story "proofs" build knowledge and entertain the reader. The rule of threes also can apply to multiple examples from different places. If, for example, new research shows a rise in foreclosures in more states, the reporter might give examples from three of them.

Regardless of their structure, stories work well when like ideas are kept together. Those ideas might be related material, as in the rule of threes, or related themes. A feature about preparations to enforce Arizona's harsh new immigration law would have one section that looks at the efforts of those interested in enforcing the law and another that examines efforts of opponents to block that enforcement. It would not whipsaw back and forth from one group to the other.

Since we all live by the clock — 24 hours a day, seven days in a week, four weeks in a month, and so forth — writing often works well if at some point it returns to the beginning and progresses to the end. The story, in other words, is organized *chronologically*. When explanatory passages or sections are needed, writers can step back from this chronological framework by alternating expository “chapters” with the personal narrative ones.

In class, students should analyze Blundell’s story about the loss of farmland in Chapter 5 (it begins on page 103), reviewing not only its structure but the content he musters. Does he apply the rule of threes? In what ways? Does he keep like ideas together? In what way? Contrast this story to the story that begins on page 114. This story relies heavily on chronology for its structure.

READING: Review Blundell, Chapter 4; Read Stepp, page 72 to 76, 138 to 139

ASSIGNMENT: Students should come prepared to discuss the following:

- William Blundell writes: “The story is happening on streets where there are no PR men strewing palms in the reporter’s path, no computers disgorging blocks of seductive statistics, and a lot of people who have nothing to gain from doing pirouettes for the press. This territory can be tough on strangers, but we have to go there to gather details and direct experiences that show the reader what we’re talking about.”

Students should discuss what he means by this. Blundell further suggests that a good half of reporting can be spent seeking the right person to talk to at that street level. Students should discuss how close to that street level they’ve gotten in their reporting and what else they might do to close the gap.

- Students also should consider whether and how they’ve used Blundell’s method of planning and execution to inform their reporting and come prepared to discuss this. Has it helped them? Confused them? Have they applied it or ignored it? Why?

Each student should weigh:

- What gaps remain in reporting his or her story.
- Whether the reporting has unearthed sound, research-based data at the story’s foundation.
- Whether or not the data is recent.
- Whether sources interviewed carry authority.
- Whether they show a range and balance.
- Whether they take the story to street level.

## Week 5: Working through the reporting process

### Class 1: Reporting at ground level

This class will be run like a newsroom in which the instructor, as editor, coaches students through the latter stages of their reporting process. Students should be challenged to defend their initial theme statement. Does it still stand up? Should it be tweaked in any way? They should be pressed on what data they've gathered to support that premise. And they should be asked to explain and, if necessary, defend their choice and breadth of sources.

READING: Stepp, pages 85-88

ASSIGNMENT: Each student should craft a two- to three-page memo containing the following:

1. An updated theme or focus statement
2. A list of primary points that support that focus, tied, if possible, to Blundell's six question areas on pages 70-75.
3. A structural design for the story. With the *Wall Street Journal* model, it might look like this:
  - o A lead that shows (or, as Blundell says, teases)
  - o A nut graph (or graphs) that establishes the story and summarizes its main point.
  - o A contextual section that places the story into a broader perspective and reinforces its main point
  - o Sections or chapters built around like ideas
  - o Anecdote or scenes interspersed as examples. These support the ideas and reintroduce the main character.
  - o A closing section that circles back to the main character.
4. An example to support each primary story point.
5. A summary of research-based evidence that supports the story's main thesis.
6. An assessment of what reporting gaps remain and how they might be filled.

### Class 2: Outlining the story

Students, working in teams of two, should read each other their revised theme statements (and consult the instructor on an as-needed basis). Teammates should listen as readers and coach as editors. Each should ask his or her teammate to talk through the story. What did he/she find most interesting? What alternative leads has he/she attempted? What gaps does the story have?

After finishing the critiques, each student should:

1. Read through notes and mark key facts, key quotes and key examples
2. Fast-draft a rough lead through the nut graph
3. Identify contextual material that would enhance the story
4. Order key points/facts that should be in the story
5. Identify interior scenes that belong in the story
6. Highlight any information that needs to be verified or double-checked.



In organizing key points, students should remember to keep like ideas together. They should seek examples that support all general statements. Some long-form feature writers work with a master chronology that sets all facts and scenes in a timeline of when they took place. This helps with fact checking and with chronological organization.

READING: Blundell, Chapter 7; Stepp, 51-57 and 176-192

## Week 6: The roots of good writing

### Class 1: Using language with style and precision

This class will review the elements of good journalistic writing, from active, right-branching sentences to specificity and simplicity of language. Among the issues instructors might touch on and model are:

1. The cadence, pace and rhythm of good writing. It should become second nature for students to read their work aloud.
2. Selective detail and its use. (Using [Journalist's Resource](#) or news websites, students might look for examples of selective detail that are enhanced by features and examples that detract because they don't reinforce storyline.)
3. Specificity versus generality. How does Blundell's rule of threes ensure specificity?
4. The use of analogy in translation and definition. (The value of comparing the unfamiliar to what we know.)
5. The importance of consistency of tone, person, tense and style.

After the discussion, students should draft either a lead anecdote or an interior scene from their stories. Some of these will be critiqued in class.

DUE: First draft of 1,500-word backgrounder or impact feature. Selected stories will be due the night before class so they can be distributed to the entire class in advance.

### Class 2: Workshopping first drafts

Selected students should read their stories aloud, discuss obstacles they faced in drafting them, explain how they tried to overcome these obstacles, and identify what they liked best about their stories and what they lacked confidence in. Classmates then will weigh in with their critiques.

READING: pages 76 and 77 (Blundell's profile outline) and these stories in his book: pages 44 to 47 and 242 to 248 (personal profiles), 248 to 254 (institutional profile) and 114 to 119 (occupational profile).

ASSIGNMENT: Students weigh the differences between a profile, a depth interview with a subject and story about their background. What does Blundell mean when he says that profiles, like other stories, need a clear theme? Students also should try to determine some of the ways that Blundell's outline on page 76 and 77 helped define the structure of his own work.

## Week 7: The profile (personal and institutional)

### Class 1: Finding a subject, finding a theme, finding out information

Few aspects of journalism are more interesting and challenging than to write about someone else, — to capture what motivates that individual, what makes that person “tick.” Profiles can be written as well about organizations and about what makes them distinctive or unusual. Good profiles demand backgrounding, patience, legwork, independent engagement and curiosity.

First, however, the reporter has to answer the questions, “Whom should I profile and why?” Sometimes those answers can be found in the news: Who has surfaced as an interesting figure? Sometimes the answers can be found in something interesting that a subject does, or doesn’t do (note the profiles in Blundell’s book of the Disney corporation, still living in the shadow of its deceased founder.) Or the answers can be found by looking for someone who exemplifies a larger group or population in the news, a veteran with PTSD, for example. Whomever or whatever the subject, writers don’t merely want to catalogue that individual’s or company’s accomplishments. Corporate biographies and resumes serve that purpose. Profiles dig beneath the surface, capture the subject complete with quirks and blemishes. They help readers understand what makes someone “tick” and what lies behind that person’s passions.

As with other features, backgrounding plays a central role in establishing the profile’s theme. Backgrounding can help the reporter identify how a subject has changed and uncover inherent contradictions between the subject’s words and actions. It allows the writer to separate what has been written about someone from what hasn’t. And it can open doors. For example, when Pulitzer Prize–winner Tracy Breton of *The Providence Journal* interviewed two actresses co-starring in a theatrical performance, she had done “her homework.” She knew that decades earlier one had understudied for the other, a fact the actresses had forgotten until reminded and one that helped Breton break the ice.

The patience to gather information in varied ways often comes into play in reporting. Profiles require multiple interviews with a subject, preferably in a setting that shows who the person is.

Profiles also benefit from the times the reporter can simply observe. Author Gay Talese, one of the most respected of a generation in the 1960s that experimented with forms of narrative nonfiction storytelling, has written and spoken about “the art of hanging out,” of observing a subject and capturing the scenes that reflect that person’s manner and personality.

To learn about subjects, reporters don’t only interview them and read what they’ve written or what has been written about them. Reporters also interview others who can provide insight — family and friends, competitors and former employees, customers and patients. That’s legwork. Whom they seek out depends largely on what the story’s focus is. A profile of a Las Vegas card shark might lead to the subject’s high school or college math teacher, his mother and his competitors around the table. It likely wouldn’t call for an interview with his former piano teacher or swim coach.

To win a subject's trust, reporters must show sincere interest in that individual. At the same time, the reporter has to maintain his or her independence. Good profiles reveal some aspect of a subject's life. They are neither intended to promote nor diminish, simply show the subject as he or she really is.

Finally, reporters must be curious enough to delve beneath the surface. Most people have a public persona and a more private one. The profile writer wants to tap into both.

During this class, students will critique the profiles published in Blundell's book and the elements of framing, reporting and writing interesting, informative profiles.

**ASSIGNMENT:** In teams of three or four, students should research their professor, then draft a tentative focus or theme statement for a profile. It might focus on the professor's research, a hobby or passion, his or her teaching style, some recent notable achievement (a book, for example) or something else. Teams should prepare to interview the professor "for story" during the next class, developing whatever themes their focus statements outline.

## **Class 2: Carrying out and critiquing an interview with the professor**

A member of each team should read that team's theme statement and other members should explain how the team decided on its focus. After all teams have finished, students will vote on which story offers the most promise. (Team members cannot vote for their own idea.) When the vote and subsequent discussion are finished, the winning team will interview the professor. Certain rules apply.

- Questions cannot be read.
- Team members should listen closely to the answer and try to build on each question in their subsequent question.
- Students on the other teams, meanwhile, should observe, take notes, and evaluate the content and quality of their classmates' interview. (They might consider, for example, how well each questioner engages, whether they are asking "open-ended" or "close-ended" questions, whether they are probing for emotion and insight as well as fact, and whether they appeared to be listening and taking cues for follow-up.)

After the interview and discussion about its effectiveness, the class should reflect on what steps would be needed to finish the profile.

**ASSIGNMENT:** During the second class of next week, students will be expected to propose a profile subject and submit a theme or focus statement that identifies their approach. They should contact the subjects before preparing their pitches. They should also thoroughly background their subjects and identify at least two other people whom they can interview to develop the story further.

READING: Article, “The Power of Listening,” Scanlan, Poynter Institute; “Rules to Interview By,” Rubinkowski, Poynter; Zinsser, pages 100 to 116; Stepp, 68 to 72; [“Frank Sinatra has a Cold.”](#) a Gay Talese profile, published in *Esquire*. Finally, students should read Anna Quindlen’s *New York Times* [“Hers” column](#) from April 10, 1986. It begins with the words, “For most of my adult life, I have been a emotional hit-and-run driver, that is, a reporter.” The essay is an excellent starting point for a discussion of the ethics of depth reporting and interviewing.

## Week 8: Interviewing for story

### Class 1: Logistical and ethical considerations in interviewing for story

Successful interviews start with strong preparation and curiosity. Reporters who know next to nothing about their subject, who seem bored or hurried, who work off a set list of questions instead of listening to answers, who seek facts rather than knowledge or understanding, will leave with little.

Jacqui Banaszynski, a Pulitzer Prize–winning reporter and now a Knight professor at the University of Missouri, says at times the most effective question can be a sympathetic nod or an interjection, such as “really.” This keeps the subject talking. Granted. It is not wise to start an interview this way. But often reporters are so intent on their questions that they don’t hear the answers and don’t encourage subjects to say more, to elaborate.

The first step in interviewing for story is to choose the right setting, a place that shows something about the subject and a place in which the subject feels comfortable. Then, says Banaszynski, the reporter’s job is to “peel back the layers of the onion,” to get to the story behind the story, to engage the real subject not the public persona. This takes time, patience, lots of directed yet open-ended questions, and genuine interest in what the subject has to say. Bored reporters conduct boring interviews.

It’s no small matter for a green reporter to park the jitters before knocking on the door. Several things help:

- Know as much as possible about the subject beforehand.
- Prepare questions in advance, but never read them. Preparation helps the reporter think through the interview’s purpose. Their questions shouldn’t be obvious — or left sitting on the table.
- Ask permission to tape as well as take notes. It can ease the anxiety of keeping up. But do take notes, listening for details and quotes and hints that bear follow-up.
- Ease in with questions that relax the subject and establish rapport. The props of setting can help. Ask why the subject has chosen a particular meeting place. Comment on pictures on the wall.
- Listen. The reporter’s job is not to ask brilliant questions but to get brilliant answers.

This class discussion should focus on the techniques and pitfalls of interviewing for story. It is a skill that requires instinct and humanity as well as thoughtful preparation. (Banaszynski describes it as a dance in which the reporter must lead, but the interview subject gets to choose the music.)

At times reporters don’t get the opportunity to interview a profile’s central character. Such was the case in Talese’s “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold.” Students should discuss how Talese compensated for this.

This session should end with a discussion of Quindlen's essay. What are the ethical dilemmas raised by interviewing for story and emotion as well as for information? What are the ethical responsibilities of the reporter in setting out on a project that will involve considerable revelation on the part of the subject (for example, a profile of a family caring for an Alzheimer's patient)?

**ASSIGNMENT:** Students should prepare a memo for pitching their profiles, which should be roughly 1,500 words in length. The memo should include:

- A theme or focus statement
- Key background information about the subject.
- Key contacts and contact information for the subject and other people the student will interview to gain insight.
- A few reflective paragraphs considering the story's approach in the context of Blundell's story development criteria on pages 76 and 77.

## **Class 2: Pitching profile ideas**

Students will read their theme statements aloud and explain why they've proposed specific profile approaches. Students and instructor should react to each theme statement and offer constructive criticism. Those students lacking clear themes will be expected to recast their theme statements for the following class.



## Week 9: The writer's voice

### Class 1: How voice emerges

Inexperienced writers frequently make the mistake of approaching “voice” as something that can be superimposed. They overwrite, laboring to create something that neither sounds like them nor reflects their style. In *On Writing Well*, Zinsser cautions that his students seem determined to “create an act of literature,” only relaxing paragraphs into a story to emerge as themselves.

Students should rest assured. For the writer who reads widely and writes frequently, voice emerges naturally over time. It is not a construct of big words and fancy phrases, nor is it an affected effort to sound carefree and breezy. It is not a celebration of the writer's opinion. It comes from within, something akin to a slightly more polished version of the writer's spoken voice.

Writes Stepp: “Voice probably comes more naturally than most writers believe. Many writers describe the struggle to ‘find’ their voice, but most writers’ voices will emerge spontaneously if they just clear away some of the obstructing professional underbrush: the artificial constraints, expectations, and hobgoblins that haunt many newsrooms, writing studios, and writer-editor collaborations. Writers who are steeped in good material, relaxed and enthusiastic about their assignment, comfortable in their surroundings, and encouraged to be original and inventive do not have to find a voice. It rings out intuitively.”

In this class, students should discuss what concerns they have about voice and how they believe they should and have gone about developing it. They should then take a scene or section of their revised first features and write through it as they might tell a friend. The class should listen to a few of these and critique them.

### Class 2: Workshopping the revised first feature

The instructor should identify two or three students who will be asked in advance to distribute their work to the class. They should read their stories aloud in class, be given the opportunity to discuss what worked for them and where they struggled. Then classmates should weigh in with a discussion of these stories, starting with what they liked best and then making suggestions for improvement.

## **Week 10: Working through the reporting process**

### **Class 1: Sharpening the story's angle and content**

Both classes in this week largely replicate the critiquing and outlining goals set in Week 5, with the instructor acting as coach to shepherd students through the latter stages of their reporting process.

Students should be asked whether their initial focus holds up; what facts, examples, quotes and scenes they have to support it; who they've interviewed (in addition to their profile subject) and what these individuals have to add. Much class time will be spent troubleshooting obstacles to reporting.

#### **ASSIGNMENT:**

Each student should craft a two- to three-page memo containing the following:

- An updated theme or focus statement
- A brief summary of key details, anecdotes and examples that give support to the theme.
- A structural design for the story (at some point within most profiles, the writer moves chronologically through at least a portion of the subject's life)
- A summary of key insights into the subject provided by other sources.
- An assessment of what reporting gaps remain and how they might be filled.

### **Class 2: Building an outline**

## Week 11: Workshop profile drafts

The instructor should keep a list throughout the semester of which students have read their work in front of the class. All students should have their work subjected to class-wide critique before any individual is given a second opportunity.

### Class 1: Workshop profile drafts

ASSIGNMENT: Bring a local newspaper and *The New York Times* to the next class.

### Class 2: Finding stories off the news

Reporters need to be nimble. The best, it is said, can “speed” as well as “bleed.” The feature writer often does not have the luxury to report and write depth public affairs stories. She’s given a day to find, report and write a story, not a week or two. This places even more weight on the challenge of conceiving something interesting and narrowing its scope. Writing stories on deadline can be a high-wire act. The reporter must gather fact and push for scene, show patience and interest in interview subjects yet race the clock, write and revise, but on the same afternoon.

Next week, the class will be expected to pitch and then write a feature off the news in the two to three days between classes. This class is designed to help students identify stories off the news.

Asking a number of questions of the news can help:

- Who is left out?
- Who is affected? How?
- What’s behind the news? (An 85-year-old becomes a citizen or graduates. Why?)
- How does the past inform the story? (The calendar and unusual anniversaries suggest stories daily.)
- What led up to the news?
- What’s the reaction to the news? (Blundell’s moves and counter-moves.)
- Who is the person behind the newsmaker?
- How can the reporter localize a national or international event?
- Do a number of similar actions — beaches closed for a high bacteria count — constitute a trend?
- Can the reporter show this, or other developments, by taking readers to a place?

In teams, reporters should scour the day’s paper, drawing up and prioritizing a list of possible features that might be turned quickly. The class will critique and respond to each team’s ideas.

ASSIGNMENT: Background and write theme statements for two stories off the news. Students will be assigned one during the next class to turn in 48 hours.

## **Week 12: Pouring it on**

### **Class 1: Pitching the feature off the news**

In this class, the instructor should coach students toward features they can reasonably report and write in a day or two. This discussion should reinforce the importance of ingenuity and scope in turning features fast.

### **Class 2: Workshop features off the news**

This class should begin with a discussion of the challenges of turning features fast. As time permits, students should workshop these efforts.

## Week 13: Finding a niche

### Class 1: Researching publications, framing queries

The topsy-turvy pace of technological changes makes this an extraordinary time to start a career in journalism. In some ways, it has never been easier to be published: Register for a blog at WordPress or Blogspot and write. It's that easy. In other ways, it's rarely been harder to get noticed and paid. Students interested in doing serious journalism should pursue a few parallel paths. Even in college, they can begin building their "brand," a word that still makes older journalists shudder (their job was to cover the news, not market themselves or be the news). Students can build brand by building a website, preferably one named after them. This should be linked to blogs, a Facebook account, Twitter accounts, a resume and examples of their writing that they hope someone significant in the world will visit and read.

If today's journalism students should act aggressively in asserting a voice and marketing their work, they also should be smart and circumspect about what they post. Too many horror stories circulate today about students denied jobs because of ill-advised party pictures posted on social media accounts. As a rule of thumb, students should sleep on anything they are tempted to post in the glow of the moment.

Marketing freelance work has been streamlined in the digital age. Most newspapers and some magazines today prefer emailed query letters pitching an article to letters sent by post.

Again, however, speed can kill rather than enhance. Sizable percentages of pitches never make it past the first gatekeeper (often an intern) for a variety of reasons:

- A misspelled name
- A letter sent to the wrong editor
- A letter sent to the right editor at the wrong publication
- Grammatical errors
- Spelling errors
- Ill-conceived or boastful ideas
- Efforts to negotiate price before a piece is sold
- Offers to write for free

Once again in journalism, the query begins with research. Reporters need to research not only stories and story ideas but which publications serve an audience that would read them. They can learn a great deal about publications, their freelance guidelines and their freelance rates in the library's most recent edition of *Writer's Market* or by subscribing online to [WritersMarket.com](http://WritersMarket.com).

As a rule, query letters should be a single page long. At their best, they show a writer's talent and sell a clearly conceived and substantive story that fits the publication's style and audience.

The query's first paragraph tries to hook the reader very much like the first sentence of a feature does. This, however, is not the place for elegant anecdotes. It is best to settle for a quick turn lead, one that grabs the reader's attention. The second paragraph pitches the story's particulars. How long is the piece the writer is proposing? How will it develop? What's its purpose? The third paragraph introduces the writer and answers the question "why me — why this writer?" This is where writers talk about special qualities — expertise, access to the subject, experience. The final or closing paragraph makes clear that the writer will follow up.

The entire letter should be businesslike. Pleading or begging editors for a chance does not work. One more tip: Always call the publication before sending a query to check whether an editor still works there, what the editor's title is, and how to spell his or her name.

In addition to discussing queries, instructors should consider inviting in a local newspaper or magazine editor to talk about the queries they've received, which queries they liked and which ones they discarded immediately. Such visits give students a chance to network, a significant aspect of building a niche.

**ASSIGNMENT:** Students should research a publication to which they will pitch one of their articles from the semester. They should come to the next class knowing the appropriate editor's name and title, the submission guidelines of the publication, and the nature of the articles it publishes.

## **Class 2: Writing and revising the query**

Students will spend this class crafting and revising query letters for one of their stories from the semester. In most cases, these should be ready to email to the publication by the end of class.

## **EXAM WEEK: Revised profiles are due**