

Fall 2015	J337F/Long-Form Feature Writing
Unique	07940
Prerequisites	310F and 311F
Class hours	11 a.m. to 12 p.m. M-W-F
Office hours	3 p.m. to 4 p.m. M-W-F, or by appointment
Room	BMC 5.214
Instructor	Kevin Robbins (@kdrobbins)
Office:	BMC 3.388
Telephone	512-471-0822 (office) 512-750-2835 (mobile)
Email	kevin.robbins@austin.utexas.edu
Facebook	Life its ownself
Twitter	@kdrobbins @ReportingSport

What we'll do

In Long-Form Feature Writing, we'll explore a realm of journalism that inhabits the imagination, engages the intellect, touches the human spirit and ignites the soul. Good journalism of any length (or form) can accomplish one or two of those ideals at times. But long-form nonfiction in particular carries the distinct and awesome power to explain in full the way something actually happened and why. Long-form nonfiction whisks readers to exotic places, introduces them to memorable characters, immerses them in extraordinary experiences, challenges their notions and beliefs, engages their senses like a vice and changes them in fundamental ways. It is the highest plane of the craft.

How we'll do that

There are two ways to become a better writer. One is to read, analyze, discuss, deconstruct and demystify fine writing. The other is to write.

I have good news today. We'll do both.

Every time we meet, we'll study great long-form nonfiction, including narrative, literary, investigative and explanatory journalism examples that borrow from fiction structure and its components to create an authentic story that informs and entertains on equally sophisticated levels. Be prepared. You will be responsible for leading class discussions about these assignments, so please (a) read them thoroughly and (b) be prepared to articulate a thoughtful conversation about them.

We'll embrace a new vocabulary. We'll adopt new ways of mapping stories. We'll identify the kinds of stories that merit long-form treatment. We'll discuss intensive long-form reporting techniques. We'll write in scenes. We'll develop an ear for dialog and an eye for a certain kind of detail that moves stories with irresistible momentum. We'll work to promote an open, supportive and trusting class environment that encourages students to grow as journalists, which means taking risks. Please be ready to take risks. By the end of the semester, you can expect to understand the complexities of

finding, researching, documenting and composing tightly focused stories of considerable depth, scope and sweep. And a wonderfully undeniable magic will have happened. During all the classroom talk about stories, topics, ideas, reporting, writing, interviewing, scenes, tone, voice, discipline, mapping, context, nuance, sweep, scope, dialog, immersion, foreshadowing, flashbacking, shotguns (yes, shotguns), backgrounding, openings, middles, closings and whatever else finds its way into our conversations, you'll be creating a story of your own that gets better and better with every little discovery you make.

I hope to create a salon-like atmosphere in Long-Form Feature Writing. We'll operate for much of the semester as a hybrid-flipped class. That means you'll do the assigned course reading independently, using lessons imparted in the best examples of long-form nonfiction to imbue your own understanding and mastery of the craft in the production of your original work. You'll be expected to participate actively and enthusiastically in classroom discussions. In other words, we're all in this together. I give each student the responsibility to make his or her classmates' work better. Everyone has a stake.

We'll interact with practicing journalists: newspaper reporters, magazine writers and book authors who, to borrow the words of the late Richard Ben Cramer, have what it takes. You can expect regular Skype video conferences and occasional in-class visits. Writers love to talk about their work. They also like helping other writers. Please use these opportunities as selfishly as you wish. It might be helpful to look at it this way: For every Pamela Colloff or Skip Hollandsworth or Tom Junod or Lane DeGregory who gives us an hour of their time, you have one (or two or three or four or more) additional instructor in Long-Form Feature Writing.

In the end, you will be responsible for ONE story in Long-Form Feature Writing. Choose your topic thoughtfully; you're going to write 3,000 words about it, so you ought to (a) like it and (b) like it enough to spend the next 15 weeks learning more about it. Your story represents 50 percent of your final grade. We'll do three exercises – each of them worth 10 percent of your final grade – that will help to build your long-form story. We'll begin discussing story ideas in the second week of class.

Note: You are encouraged to submit early drafts of your final stories. You may do this as soon as you're ready, but please do not wait until the day before your story is due. Good editing – both word and idea – takes time. I cannot promise a thorough and thoughtful edit if I have 15 stories to read in 15 hours. I ask for your understanding.

What kind of policies we'll have

Time management is a very important. So is professional honesty. Just as editors depend on their reporters to be where they're supposed to be, you'll be expected to attend class faithfully. Just as the entire news operation depends on reporters to turn in assignments on time, you will be expected to submit your work on time. Assignments must be submitted by 11:59 p.m. on the day they are due. Assignments not filed by 11:59 p.m. will be rewarded with a grade of zero. Only legitimate medical and family emergencies will qualify as exceptions to this policy. Please alert the instructor as soon as possible in the event of such an emergency.

A word on devices in class: Please do not use laptops, cell phones, tablets and the like while we're together, unless that day's work requires them.

A word on plagiarism: Do not plagiarize. Plagiarism is one of the worst sins in journalism. Students caught stealing the work of others (or committing the equivalent crimes of inventing sources, quotes or other facts in stories) will receive a grade of zero for the assignment in question. Repeated

plagiarism, which is to say plagiarism committed two or more times, will qualify the student for an F in the course.

I recommend you add @gangrey, @longform and @longreads to your Twitter feed.

How you'll be evaluated

We'll do three short but important exercises designed to launch your final stories. Each will be subject to class critique before it's scored, ensuring that you submit your best work.

They are:

The Pitch: Great stories start with great ideas. Your great idea will be expressed in a 300-word pitch no smart editor could refuse. The pitch includes the following components: the focus of your story, a statement about why your story matters, a setting for the story, a form (a reported essay, for example, or a documentary narrative) a main character and at least three secondary characters.

Due: Sunday, Sept. 20

The Outline: Great stories also start with great outlines. Outlines prove you know where your story is going. They also serve as a reference map. Outlines must include at least five, and no more than 10, action statements. We will discuss the definition and purpose of action statements early in the course.

Due: Sunday, Oct. 25

The Scene: Great stories have great scenes. They have great opening scenes, pivotal scenes, climactic scenes, closing scenes. You'll submit your favorite 500-word scene.

Due: Sunday, Nov. 8

The story: Each of the three shorter assignments, in addition to class reading and discussion each day, is designed to prepare you for the rigors of producing your final story. The final story must meet the 3,000-word length limit, plus or minus 100 words. Stories of 2,899 words or fewer will be penalized one letter grade. So will stories of 3,111 words or more. (See Appendix I for this and other assignment rubrics.)

Note that this is not a "rough draft." It is indeed a "first draft," but the final should represent your best effort at telling your complete, intact story.

Due: Wednesday, Nov. 25

FINAL REVISION DUE Friday, Dec. 4

There are 400 points available in the class. The three short exercises will be worth 40 points each, for a total of 120 points. Eighty points will be available for overall class preparation and participation. The remaining 200 points are reserved for the final story, which is due at 11:59 p.m. of the specific day assigned to you.

Final grades will be calculated using the plus/minus system. Note: All numbers are absolute, and will not be rounded up or down at any stage. Thus, a B- will be inclusive of all scores from 80.000 percent to 83.999 percent. The University does not recognize the grade of A+.

Our scale:

A	100 percent to 94 percent of 400 available points
A-	93 percent to 90 percent
B+	89 percent to 87 percent
B	86 percent to 84 percent
B-	83 percent to 80 percent
C+	79 percent to 77 percent
C	76 percent to 74 percent
C-	73 percent to 70 percent
D+	69 percent to 67 percent
D	66 percent to 64 percent
D-	63 percent to 60 percent
F	59 percent and below

Flexible schedule (a working document)

Week 1 Getting acquainted with each other, the class and long-form journalism

Week 2 Turning topics into ideas: Demystifying the long-form subject

Week 3 Turning ideas into stories: Plotting the course. Understanding action statements

Week 4 Gathering string: Backgrounding for the big picture

Pitches due at 11:59 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 20

Week 5 Context, nuance, historical relevance, sweep and scope

Week 6 Plotting the map: Outlining your long form

Week 7 Opening statements: Knowing where to start – and how

Week 8 Reporting and writing vivid scenes, skilled use of detail

Week 9 Focus week: Understanding your story, what it is and what it's not

Week 10 The discipline of organic narrative

Outlines due at 11:59 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 25

Week 11 Voice, tone and writing so it doesn't sound like writing

Week 12 Cohesion: unity out of chaos

Scenes due at 11:59 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 8

Week 13 The last, lasting impression: Writing the end

Week 14 Draft and workshop week

Story drafts due at 11:59 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 25

Week 15 Draft and workshop week. Farewells.

Final drafts due at 11:59 p.m. Friday, Dec. 4

This course carries an **Independent Inquiry** Flag. Independent Inquiry courses are designed to engage you in the process of inquiry over the course of a semester, providing you with the opportunity for independent investigation of a question, problem, or project related to your major. You should therefore expect a substantial portion of your grade to come from the independent investigation and presentation of your own work.

This course also carries the **Writing** Flag. Writing Flag courses are designed to give students experience with writing in an academic discipline. In this class, you can expect to write regularly during the semester, complete substantial writing projects, and receive feedback from your instructor to help you improve your writing. You will also have the opportunity to revise one or more assignments, and you may be asked to read and discuss your peers' work. You should therefore expect a substantial portion of your grade to come from your written work. Writing Flag classes meet the Core Communications objectives of Critical Thinking, Communication, Teamwork, and Personal Responsibility, established by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

Accommodations for religious holidays: By UT Austin policy, you must notify the instructor of your pending absence at least fourteen days prior to the date of observance of a religious holy day. If you must miss a class, an examination, a work assignment, or a project in order to observe a religious holy day, you will be given an opportunity to complete the missed work within a reasonable time after the absence.

A word about safety: Please refer to the recommendations regarding emergency evacuation from the Office of Campus Safety and Security (<http://www.utexas.edu/safety>).

The University Honor Code: The core values of the University of Texas at Austin are learning, discovery, freedom, leadership, individual opportunity, and responsibility. Each member of the University is expected to uphold these values through integrity, honesty, trust, fairness, and respect toward peers and community.

Statement on Equal Educational Opportunity: The University of Texas at Austin is committed to an educational and working environment that provides equal opportunity to all members of the University community. In accordance with federal and state law, the University prohibits unlawful discrimination, including harassment, on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, gender, including sexual harassment, age, disability, citizenship, and veteran status. Discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression is also prohibited pursuant to University policy.

Appendix I Assignment rubrics

The pitch

Assignment meets 300-word budget	8 points
Assignment includes statement of focus	8 points
Assignment includes statement of importance (why story matters)	8 points
Assignment includes projected form	8 points
Assignment includes a main character and at least three secondary characters	8 points
Total available	40

The outline

Assignment includes five to 10 action statements	10 points
Assignment reflects proportionate reporting	10 points
Assignment supports clear and compelling storytelling	10 points
Assignment suggests thoughtful, sensible structure	10 points
Total available	40

The scene

Assignment meets 500-word budget (+/- 10 words)	10 points
Assignment contains substantial and appropriate level of reporting	10 points
Assignment suggests arc	10 points
Assignment contains no grammar, punctuation or Associated Press style errors	10 points
Total available	40

The story

Work meets 3,000-word budget (+/- 100 words) 25 points

Work demonstrates critical thinking about issues relevant to a full treatment 25 points

Writing is focused, disciplined, clear and appealing 25 points

Work demonstrates appropriate level of research and reporting depth 25 points

Work includes at least four actual, human voices 25 points

Work is supported by range of other appropriate sources/markers 25 points

Work includes proper grammar, spelling and punctuation 25 points

Work is free of Associated Press style errors 25 points

Total available 200