PBPL 25750 / CRWR 27002: Writing about Chicago
Winter 2011; Mon./Wed. 10:30-11:50 a.m.; HM 141

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This course explores the craft of creative non-fiction and narrative-based social science writing with an emphasis on writing about social and policy matters in Chicago. The course itself moves through the stages of story development: initial idea and purpose, interviews and public records research, effective writing and narrative technique, and revision and working with an editor. The course will focus heavily on developing student writing in a workshop setting with the end goal being a publishable article of some kind. The course is designed for aspiring journalists and book writers, and those working on BA theses amenable to narrative presentation. The course will feature several guest writers and editors and will be co-taught by a former editor of the Chicago Tribune.

Grading:

- 30% participation and attendance
- 40% writing/analysis exercise (4 @ 10% each)
- 30% final article

Participation/Attendance: We expect students to attend and participate in all class meetings. An absence can only be excused if it is brought to our attention before class.

Writing/Analysis Exercises: There will be four writing exercises during the term. Please:

1) submit in hard copy at the beginning of class;
2) include a word count (under “Tools” menu in Microsoft Word);

Exercises will be graded w/a check plus (10/10), check (8.5/10), or check minus (7/10). Exercises can be made up if you fall behind, but will be considered late.

Final Article: The main goal of the course is to develop, from scratch in most cases, a high-quality, well-researched and publishable feature-length newspaper or magazine article or BA thesis section.

Course Readings:

- Alex Kotlowitz. 1992. *There are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America.*
Course Schedule

WEEK 1

1/3 (Mon): Introduction

Section I. Finding, Conceptualizing and Proposing a Meaningful Story

1/5 (Wed): Workshop #1: Story Proposal
  Read: *Telling True Stories*, Part I: An Invitation to Narrative (pp. 3-18)
  Read: *Telling True Stories*, Part II: Finding, Researching, Reporting Topics (pp. 19-64)
  Due: Story Pitch (400 words, ungraded)

WEEK 2

1/10 (Mon): *Twice Told Tale: Social Science and Creative Non-Fiction*
  Chalk: Broughton, “Migration as Engendered Practice”
  Chalk: Broughton, “The View North from Barra de Cazones”
  Due: Have an interview set up!

Section II. Legwork: Getting and Doing Interviews and Following the Story

1/12 (Wed): Guest: Julia Keller (confirmed)
  Chalk: Keller, “Part 1: A wicked wind takes aim”
  Chalk: Keller, “Part 2: ‘Milestone’s gone!’”
  Chalk: Keller, “Part 3: After the storm’s fury”
  Read: *Telling True Stories*, Part III: Name Your Subgenre (pp. 65-96)

WEEK 3

1/17 (Mon): MLK Day, no class
  Read: Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day* (first half)

1/19 (Wed): Workshop #2: Following the Story
  Read: *Telling True Stories*, Part VI: Ethics (pp. 163-196)
  **Exercise 1: Story Proposal:** gives a detailed description of the subject matter; a rationale for writing the story in narrative form; suggestions for what actions or scenes will propel the story forward; a description of what sources will be used, including interview subjects and a range of records material (1000 words).
Section III. Digging for Gold: Research in Public Records of All Kinds

WEEK 4

1/24 (Mon): Guest via Skype: Louise Kiernan (confirmed)
   Chalk: Kiernan, “Part 2: Wind, Neglect Propel Glass on a Deadly Path”
   Read: Telling True Stories, Part IV: Constructing a Structure (pp. 97-124)

1/26 (Wed): Workshop #3: Research
   Read: Chalk: Toobin, “The Scholar,” The New Yorker
   Due: Exercise 2: Profile of a non-public person: This writing assignment should show evidence of interview skill, carefully observed actions and scenes, and use of records research, including traditional public sources as well as personal archival sources (diaries, drawings, letters, emails, speeches, etc.)(1000-1500 words).

Section IV. Structuring the Narrative: Arc, Pacing, and Story Design

WEEK 5

1/31 (Mon): Guest: Elizabeth Taylor
   Chalk: Taylor & Cohen, American Pharoah (excerpt)
   Chalk: Royko, Boss (excerpt)
   Due: Exercise 3: Reported essay on place: The location of one’s story is often an important character in a narrative, sometimes the defining character. This piece should be a richly and revealingly-detailed portrait of a place—a city, a room, a building, etc.—with both closely observed and historically researched fact (1000-1500 words).

2/2 (Wed): Narrative Social Science
   Read: Venkatesh, Gang Leader for a Day (second half)
   Due: Exercise 4: Book critique (if you're writing on Gang Leader for a Day)

WEEK 6

2/7 (Mon): Read: Kotlowitz, There are No Children Here (first half)

2/9 (Wed): Guest: Alex Kotlowitz (confirmed)
   Read: Kotlowitz, There are No Children Here (second half)
   Due: Exercise 4: Book critique (if you're writing on There are No Children Here)
WEEK 7

2/14 (Mon): Workshop #4: Narratives
   **Chalk:** Pollan, *Omnivore's Dilemma*, introduction (society and policy)

2/16 (Wed): Workshop #5: Narratives
   **Chalk:** Lemann, *The Promise Land*, introduction (social history)

Section V. Revise, Revise, Revise: Editing on Your Own and with an Editor

WEEK 8

2/21 (Mon): **Editing**
   **Guest:** Dick Babcock, *Chicago Magazine* (confirmed)
   **Read:** *Telling True Stories*, Part VII: Editing (pp. 197-226)
   **Read:** *Telling True Stories*, Part VIII: Narrative in the News Organization (pp. 227-262)

2/23 (Wed): Workshop #6: Narratives

WEEK 9

2/28 (Mon): Workshop #7: Narratives

3/2 (Wed): Workshop #8: Narratives

WEEK 10

3/7 (Mon): Workshop #9: Narratives
   **Read:** *Telling True Stories*, Part V: Building Quality into the Work (pp. 125-162)

3/9 (Wed): Workshop #10: Narratives
   **Read:** *Telling True Stories*, Part IX: Building a Career in Magazines and Books (pp. 263-288)

WEEK 11

3/14 (Mon): **Due:** Two copies of final article by 2 p.m. to GB218A