

DEPARTMENT OF MODERN LANGUAGES
AND CULTURAL STUDIES

<https://uofa.ualberta.ca/modern-languages-and-cultural-studies>

2019-2020 WRITE 399/MLCS 299 StoryLab: Theory and Practice in Nonfiction Narrative
(Fall Term)

Instructor: Russell Cobb

Time: 9:00-950MWF

Office: 409 C, Old Arts Bldg.

Place: HC 2-15

Telephone: 780-938-3183 Fax: 780-492-9106

Office Hours: Friday, 3:00-5:00

E-mail: rcobb@ualberta.ca

or by appointment

Personal Website: <http://www.mlcs.ualberta.ca/People/Faculty/CobbRussell.aspx>

Course Prerequisite: N/A

Course-based Ethics Approval in place regarding all research projects that involve human testing, questionnaires, etc.?

Yes No, not needed, no such projects approved

Community Service Learning Component:

None

Past or Representative Evaluative Course Material Available

- Exam registry – Students' Union
<http://www.su.ualberta.ca/services/infolink/exams>
- See explanations below
- Document distributed in class
- Other (please specify)
- NA

Course Description and Objectives:

This is a course designed to explore the theory and practice of nonfiction storytelling across a variety of media. It has been said with live in a “post-truth world” of fake news or “alternative facts.” This course interrogates those ideas by exploring the limits of truth, but ultimately reaffirming the importance of grounding narrative in “whatsoever things be true.” Part of the course will deal with evolving standards of truth in media, but another significant aspect of this course involves laboratory work narratives. A variety of platforms for storytelling will be explored (magazine writing, documentary film, standup, podcasting, TED-style talks) and students will, by the end of the course, produce one significant, polished work of nonfiction storytelling.

Course format: Lectures, discussions, and activities in class. Substantial reading and writing outside of class.

Important Dates: [See Academic Schedule in current Calendar](#)

First Day of Class: September 4, 2019

Add/Delete Date: September 16, 2019

50% Withdrawal Date: October 3, 2019

Withdrawal Date: November 29, 2019

Last Day of Class: December 6, 2019

Final Exam Date (if applicable): N/A

Date of Deferred Final Exam (if applicable): Please consult the following site: [https://calendar.ualberta.ca/content.php?catoid=6&navoid=806#Examinations_\(Exams\)](https://calendar.ualberta.ca/content.php?catoid=6&navoid=806#Examinations_(Exams))

Deferred Final Examination: For information on how to apply for a deferred exam see [“I Missed my Final Exam, Now What?”](#)

Objectives. Successful students will be able to do the following:

- Understand how notions of truth in nonfiction have evolved over time.
- Recognize the stylistic differences between different genres of nonfiction storytelling: blogging, podcasting, journalism, etc.
- Improve writing and research skills in scholarly and popular modes of writing
- Produce a work of depth that showcases a student’s creative production in nonfiction storytelling

Grade Distribution (see “Explanatory Notes”):

Term Work 100% No final exam

Explanatory Notes on Assignments:

1. Various dates

Five informal writing prompts (25%)

(5% each) to be marked check, check plus, check minus. The default mark here is a check (80%) which is a good, solid response with references to texts in question. Superbly thought-provoking and very well written responses may receive a check plus, but these marks will be rare. Check minus (60%) will be given to responses that meet the word count but are sloppily written and/or not referring to the texts in question. Please check work schedule for specific

dates (first due date is Sept. 18). Create and submit via Google Docs to rcobb@ualberta.ca
One Google Doc will serve as your portfolio to all your informal writing during the term.

2. October 16

Formal Pitch (Prospectus) for final project (10%)

The pitch will lay out the students' ideas, methodology, and context for the final project. It must include:

- One 200 word scene
- 400 word synopsis of entire story
- Statement on methodology--how student intends to actually bring the story to life. Interviews? Primary sources? Immersive experiences? Larger context?
- Statement on intended platform: ex. "I plan to submit this as a TEDx talk at the University of Alberta. Or: I plan to submit this as a longform feature article to The Gateway"
- Statement on sources: Explain who you are going to interview, what background literature you will consult.
 - You must have at least four sources, two primary and two secondary.
- Cannot be longer than 800 words all told.

3. November 18

Rough draft (15%)

Final project will consist of one nonfiction narrative in the platform of the student's choosing. Use one story examined in class as a model. Focus on a story that only you can tell. Must be nonfiction and backed up with research. All factual claims must be annotated in Chicago Style with footnotes. Must be narrative (story-based). Must be at least 10 minutes minimum 15 minutes maximum if audio or performance based. 2500 words minimum, 4000 words maximum if written.

It can be done in teams of no more than two people. If so, maximums and minimums are doubles. Must contain some element of "the literary" (reference class discussion).

- Students will receive a mark and extensive feedback. Students will use that feedback to improve their mark on the final project.

4. Last week of course.

Presentation of final project (5%)

Students will give 5-7 minute presentations of their final project to the rest of the class. Strict time limits apply: no shorter than 5 minutes and no longer than 7 minutes. What I'm looking for:

- A TED-talk like engaging presentation with at least one SCENE and one takeaway message for the rest of the class.

5. December 10

Completed final project (20%)

Same requirements as rough draft. At this point, all aspects of the project should be polished up. I will mark the assignment with your rough draft as the baseline. If you received a B- and make significant revisions, you can receive up to one whole letter grade of improvement (maximum grade, A-)

6. Class Participation (15%)

This grade evaluates physical presence in class as well as engagement with discussion and lecture. For example, if you don't even bother to bring our texts to class, this grade will suffer. Students will evaluate their performance on the last day of class. "80% of life is showing up"

Important note: this portion is a combination of physical presence, oral participation in class, and written participation on eClass forums. ALL THREE are required and all three count for five percent each.

7. Pop quizzes (10%)

Pop quizzes will be given to assess whether students are keeping up with the reading. These quizzes may or may not be announced. Students can drop either: One pop quiz or one informal writing assignment at the end. I know this sounds terrible, but it's the best way to ensure accountability for reading.

Required Notes:

Policy about course outlines can be found in the [Evaluation Procedures and Grading System](#) of the University Calendar.

Student Responsibilities:

Academic Integrity:

The University of Alberta is committed to the highest standards of academic integrity and honesty. Students are expected to be familiar with these standards regarding academic honesty and to uphold the policies of the University in this respect. Students are particularly urged to familiarize themselves with the provisions of the Code of Student Behaviour (online at www.governance.ualberta.ca) and avoid any behaviour that could potentially result in suspicions of cheating, plagiarism, misrepresentation of facts and/or participation in an offence. Academic dishonesty is a serious offence and can result in suspension or expulsion from the University.

All students should consult [the Academic Integrity website](#). If you have any questions, ask your instructor.

An instructor or coordinator who is convinced that a student has handed in work that he or she could not possibly reproduce without outside assistance is obliged, out of consideration of

fairness to other students, to report the case to the Associate Dean of the Faculty. See the [Academic Discipline Process](#).

Learning and Working Environment:

The Faculty of Arts is committed to ensuring all students; faculty and staff are able to study and work in an environment that is safe and free from discrimination and harassment. It does not tolerate behaviour that undermines that environment. The Department urges anyone who feels that this policy is being violated to:

- Discuss the matter with the person whose behaviour is causing concern; or
- If that discussion is unsatisfactory, or there is concern that direct discussion is inappropriate or threatening, discuss it with the Chair of the Department.

For additional advice or assistance regarding this policy you may contact the [Office of the Student Ombuds](#). Information about the [University of Alberta Discrimination and Harassment Policy and Procedures](#) is described in [UAPPOL](#).

Territorial Statement:

The University of Alberta acknowledges that we are located on Treaty 6 territory, and respects the histories, languages, and cultures of the First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and all First Peoples of Canada, whose presence continues to enrich our vibrant community.

Sexual Violence Policy:

It is the policy of the University of Alberta that sexual violence committed by any member of the University community is prohibited and constitutes misconduct. Resources and more information can be found at <https://www.ualberta.ca/campus-life/sexual-violence>

Recording of Lectures:

Audio or video recording of lectures, labs, seminars or any other teaching environment by students is allowed only with the prior written consent of the content author(s) or as a part of an approved accommodation plan. Recorded material is to be used solely for personal study, and is not to be used or distributed for any other purpose without prior written consent from the content author(s).

Attendance, Absences, and Missed Grade Components:

Regular attendance is essential for optimal performance in any course. In cases of potentially excusable absences due to illness or domestic affliction, notify your instructor by e-mail within two days. Regarding absences that may be excusable and procedures for addressing course components missed as a result, consult sections [Attendance](#) and [Examinations](#) of the University Calendar. Be aware that unexcused absences will result in partial or total loss of the grade for the “attendance and participation” component(s) of a course, as well as for any assignments that are not handed-in or completed as a result.

Deferral of term work is a privilege and not a right; there is no guarantee that a deferral will be granted. Misrepresentation of facts to gain a deferral is a serious breach of the Code of Student Behaviour.

In this course, attendance is evaluated by your presence in the classroom, your active participation in classroom discussions, and presence in online forums. Sleeping, texting, and facebooking in class will reduce your participation grade. Every absence after two unexcused absences results in a 10% reduction of the class participation segment of the course. Participation will also be assessed by preparation for discussion and will be self-assessed at the end of the course.

Policy for Late Assignments:

Students who consult in advance with an instructor regarding contingencies preventing the timely completion of an assignment may, at the discretion of the instructor, be granted an extension once throughout the course with no penalty. Late excuses will not be accepted for any reason. Assignments handed in late will be deducted 10% per each working day they are handed in late. For example, if a paper is due on Tuesday, but you hand it on Thursday, that will incur a 20% deduction.

Disclaimer:

Any typographical errors in this syllabus are subject to change and will be announced in class and posted on eClass.

Student Resources:

The best all-purpose website for student services is: <https://www.ualberta.ca/current-students>.

Accessibility Resources: (1 – 80 SUB)

The University of Alberta is committed to creating work and learning communities that inspire and enable all people to reach their full potential. Accessibility Resources promotes an accessible, inclusive, and universally designed environment. For general information to register for services visit the [Accessibility Resources](#) webpage.

The Academic Success Centre: (1-80 SUB)

[The Academic Success Centre](#) offers a variety of workshops on effective study and exam strategies. There are in-person and online sessions available for a modest fee.

The Centre for Writers: (1-42 Assiniboia Hall)

The [Centre for Writers](#) offers free one-on-one writing support to students, faculty, and staff. Students can request consultation for a writing project at any stage of development. Instructors can request class visits and presentations.

Health and Wellness Support: There are many health and community services available to current students. For more information visit the [Health and Wellness Support](#) webpage.

Office of the Student Ombuds:

The [Office of the Student Ombuds](#) offers confidential interviews, advice and support to students facing academic, discipline, interpersonal and financial difficulties.

Grading:

Assessment of the individual course components may be in the form of numerical marks or letter grades. The final letter grade will be based on "a combination of absolute achievement and relative performance in a class" (University Calendar, [Evaluation Procedures and Grading System](#)). The University Grading Procedure mandates that "a student's level of achievement of the goals/outcomes of a course, their grade, and the descriptor of that grade must be aligned" (<https://policiesonline.ualberta.ca/>). The following guidelines have been adopted by the Department of Modern Languages and Cultural Studies:

Wednesday, September 4

Introduction to the course:

The Art of Fact? Factual literature? Literary nonfiction? Combining the literary and the empirically proven in the age of Fake News and Alternative Facts

1. Post-truth age?
2. Aristotelian division between the Poet and the Historian
3. What is a fact? What is "the literary"?
4. Introductions: tell one fact about yourself and one fiction. Let's see if we can guess which is fact and which is fiction.
5. Emphasize theory but also practice....one significant work of creative nonfiction by the end of class

Friday, September 6

Theory

- More on the theoretical basis of the course. Discuss Porter and the implications of social media on narrating the self. More about the course for newcomers.
- Set up Google Drive for collaborative writing. Reacting to prompts.

Class preparation:

Read:

- "Rewriting the Self," Roy Porter (Google Drive)

React:

- What are some of the ways that you narrativize yourself? Reflect the ideas in the essay and social media. Post thoughts on eClass forum
-

Week 2

Monday, September 9

Fact, fiction, and the ground between

- The importance of grounding in fact. Where the matter gets blurry. How to decide what is fake and what isn't. How to relax and not get too riled up if you make a mistake. Case studies: Frey and Glass.

Read:

- Gutkind, *You Can't Make This Up*, pp.14-31

Prepare:

- How do you know the information you find on the Internet is fact or fiction? Post your thoughts on eClass discussion forum.

Wednesday, September 11

Discuss issues of composite characters, dialogue, ethical concerns when writing about other people. Develop a character sketch.

Read:

- Gutkind, *You Can't Make This Stuff Up*, "Creative Nonfiction Police," pp. 32-43

Ponder:

- When does one cross the line from creative nonfiction to falsehood?

Friday, September 13

Case study: Mike Daisey and "This American Life"

We are going to discuss the issues Gutkind raises with respect to Mike Daisey's story "Mr. Daisey and the Apple Factory" and "Retraction."

Read/listen:

- Mr. Daisey and the Apple Factory, This American Life
 - <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/454/mr-daisey-and-the-apple-factory>
 - Retraction, This American Life:
 - <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/460/retraction>
-

Monday, September 16

Terminology, ethics.

In class:

- Lecture/Discuss differences between memoir, lyric essay, reporting, etc.
- Look at examples...try to define “lyric”
- Go over format for first informal writing assignment.

Read:

- Gutkind, *You Can’t Make This Up*, pp. 55-64
- Kathryn Harrison, *The Kiss* (fragment on eClass)
 - <https://www.oprah.com/oprahshow/excerpt-the-kiss-by-kathryn-harrison/all>

Write:

- Reflect on the ethics of *The Kiss* and “Mr. Daisey and the Apple Factory” (due Sept. 18)
 - Writing assignment #1: In 600 words or less, reflect on the ethics of storytelling in *The Kiss* and “Mr. Daisey and the Apple Factory.” Make sure refer to terms developed in class and develop an arguable position on the ethics of these two texts.
 - Additional notes:
 - Create a Google Doc labeled “Last Name, First Name, Informal Writing Assignments).
 - You will use this one Doc for all assignments. It will be a portfolio of sorts.
 - No extra research required, but that is an option.

Wednesday, September 18

Reporting and researching: first steps.

Discuss research vs. reporting. Academic v. Popular. They are not all that different: should be curiosity-driven, a desire to find out more about something.

Reading:

- Gutkind, *You Can’t Make This Up*, pp. 61-82

Do:

- Write an immersive experience in which you will write everything you see, hear, feel, touch, and smell.

Friday, September 20

Guest visit. Interview our guest writer, Jana Pruden

Reading:

- Jana Pruden, *After the Fire*

Do: Read the writer’s article. Dig around on the internet, and come up with three pointed questions to ask the writer.

- Someone please ask her why we are so obsessed with “true crime”!
-

Monday, September 23

Getting outside your cultural box: research and reporting on other cultures

Possible quiz on guest visit.

Discussing how to get outside your bubble and what to be aware of.

Writing about others.

Read:

Medina and Kalita, “Telling True Stories,” pp. 46-51

Devon Mihesuah, “Natives and Academics” pp. 1-15

- Reading here:

https://books.google.ca/books?id=deAb5886Yh8C&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ViewAPI&hl=en&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false

Do:

Post a reaction on eClass to this question:

- How do you know the limits of your own culture? How do you go about finding out what you can and cannot write about regarding another culture?

Wednesday, September 25

More on telling stories about other cultures. Exoticizing, othering, Orientalisms

Read:

- Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight”

Do:

- Post thoughts on this question: How do you write about a “foreign” culture without exoticizing or “othering” it? Come up with examples from social media

Friday, September 27

Guest #2: Oumar Salifou: ex-editor of The Gateway and current Associate Producer at CBC

Read/listen:

- Read Oumar’s piece on rugby
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/sherwood-park-rugby-pioneer-remembered-for-his-passion-1.5234824>
- Listen to him hosting The Gateway on CJSR:
 - <https://www.thegatewayonline.ca/2016/09/gateway-presents-cycling-race/>

Monday, September 30

Details as metaphors

In class:

- Detail as metaphor for something else: Wolfe, Geertz, etc.

Informal Writing assignment #2: Write short, but closely observed scene of something. Could be a game, an event, something that happened on transit. Embed a metaphor in the scene.

(500-600 words)

Read:

- Gutkind, "Intimate Details," pp. 124-134
- Refresh your memory of "Deep Play"
- Deadline for Informal Writing assignment #2: Write short, but closely observed scene of something. Could be a game, an event, something that happened on transit. Embed a metaphor in the scene. (500-600 words)

Wednesday, October 2

Go over the dance between literary scenes, character building, and information/reporting

Read:

- Gutkind, "Inner Point of View" pp. 135-182

Friday, October 4

Guest speaker on ethics--Chris Chang-Yen Phillips

Read/listen:

- Aja Romano, "S-town is a stunning podcast. It probably shouldn't have been made."
<https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/3/30/15084224/s-town-review-controversial-podcast-privacy>
- [S-town, Chapter 1](#)

Do:

- Come ready to discuss and debate how far is too far when digging into people's private lives.

Week 6

Monday, October 7

Case study: S-Town podcast

Read/Listen:

- “S-town,” Chapter 2
- “The Journalist and the Murderer,” Janet Malcolm

Wednesday, October 9

Discuss scenes, metaphors, inner point of view. Being too “on the nose”

Read:

- Intro to “The Ghost of Tommy Atkins”

Do:

- Write one short scene in first person and then rewrite it third person

Friday, October 11

Entire day dedicated to building, discussing, workshopping pitches for final project.

In class:

- Guidelines for pitch
- Primary / secondary sources
- Methodologies
- THE MORE DETAILED THE BETTER

Monday, October 14

Thanksgiving--No Class

Wednesday, October 16

Deadline for final project prospectus, American Crime story: The People vs. OJ Simpson,

Lay out second half of term.

- Discuss pitches
- Watch segments of American Crime Story, The People vs. OJ Simpson
- Talk about Informal Writing assignment #3:
 - Write a vivid, detail-oriented scene of something historical you did not actually witness WITHOUT MAKING ANYTHING UP. Due Oct. 18

Friday, October 18

Discuss the details and limits of reconstructing a scene. How to cobble together information that you didn't directly witness.

Read:

- Gutkind, “Recreation or Reconstruction?” pp. 186-203
- Read article by Russell Cobb on the Tulsa Massacre of 1921. How could the author reconstruct a scene from so long ago?

Do:

- Deadline, informal assignment #3 Write a vivid, detail-oriented scene of something historical you did not actually witness WITHOUT MAKING ANYTHING UP. Due Oct. 18
-

Monday, October 21

Library session day. Refining pitches, building out context, finding sources.

Do:

- Bring your pitch to class and form a research question to explore during the session.

Wednesday, October 23

How to actually create a narrative. Notions of chronology.

Do:

Read:

- Gutkind, “The Narrative Line and the Hook,” pp, 204-217

Friday, October 25

Guest speaker: Omar Mouallem

Read:

- Read two pieces by Omar Mouallem on eClass

Do:

- Prepare four questions for guest.

Monday, October 28

Theoretical interlude to discuss postmodern relativism, colonization, racism and other problem in research and reporting The Truth.

Read:

- The Conversation Explainer: <https://theconversation.com/explainer-what-is-postmodernism-20791>
- [Michiko Kakutani, “Bending the Truth in a Million Little Ways:](#)

Wednesday, October 30

Theoretical interlude to discuss postmodern relativism, competing notions of truth
Return to postmodernism and expand discussion into non-Western notions of truth.

Guest speaker: Apollonia Piña

Watch:

- Truth and Reconciliation in higher education and the media:
What are the responsibilities? What is needed to overcome the legacy of colonialism?

https://worldviewsconference.com/2019-lecture/?utm_source=OCUFA+Report&utm_campaign=f55f34b30c-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_03_22_02_32&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_458512323c-f55f34b30c-&mc_cid=f55f34b30c&mc_eid=%5bUNIQID%5d

Friday, November 1

Theoretical interlude: decolonizing knowledge, considering non-Western forms of knowledge.

Listen/read:

- Media Indigena, Reckoning with Reconciliation

Monday, November 4

Discussion day. How do these various theoretical issues affect the actual stories you tell? There's no right or wrong answer, folk, and don't be scared.

Do:

- Informal writing assignment #4 on the above question due.

Wednesday, November 6

Read:

- Gutkind, pp. 218-235

Friday, November 8

Workshop day on rough drafts

Bring two copies of your rough draft to class to share with peers.

Week 11

--Reading Week---

Monday, November 18

Turn in rough draft

In class:

- Scenes from Guy Maddin, My Winnipeg
- Discuss how Maddin interweaves large-scale history with personal memoir

Wednesday, November 20

Finish discussion of “My Winnipeg”

Watch/write:

- Finish the film and post your thoughts on the eClass forum about ethics and actors.

Friday, November 22

Guest speaker: Shama Rangwala

Read TBA

Monday, November 25

Guest speaker: Jesse Lipscombe

Prepare:

- Watch Jesse’s TED Talk, and prepage four questions for him.
 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwuGtrG6NMU&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR0NZtl1i_TVjo1FvAP-e3zToH7wlFAV72miGYEmfR3aN4hcGMwHVmIEWw

Wednesday, November 27

Catch up day: discuss final papers.

Do:

- Submit final writing assignment: open topic: reaction to one of our guest speakers, discussing some element of their work and your reaction to it.

Friday, November 29

Workshop day. Bring two copies of your final draft to class to workshop. I will provide a series of questions for you to work through.

Monday, December 2

Presentations

Wednesday, December 4

Presentation

Friday, December 6

Presentations, party, final questions and self-evaluation for class participation

December 10, 5:00pm

Absolute last day to turn in written version of project