

# Literary Journalism

JO 542 Fall 2025



**Lisa Taddeo**, author of *Three Women*

In this course, we study literary journalism and experiment with writing beyond the norm of everyday journalism. We also study the lives and works of several great practitioners.

You will become an expert on a storyteller and share everything you learn with your classmates. After studying these great storytellers, you will put what you know into practice by trying some of these techniques for yourself.

This is our required reading:

- Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* (Random House, 1966)
- Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Beautiful Struggle* (Spiegel and Grau, 2008)
- Jesselyn Cook, *The Quiet Damage* (Crown, 2024)
- Dave Cullen, *Columbine* (Twelve, 2009)
- Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (Knopf, 2005)
- David Finkel, *An American Dreamer* (Random House, 2024)
- Roxane Gay, *Hunger* (Harper Collins, 2017)

Professor **William McKeen**

**Office:** 306-B Alden Hall [704 Commonwealth Ave.]

**Phone:** 617-353-5015

**Email:** [wmckeen@bu.edu](mailto:wmckeen@bu.edu)

**Office hours:** Mondays, 3-4 pm; Wednesdays, 12:10-1:10 pm; Thursdays, 1-2 pm; and by appointment

**Home page:** [williammckeen.com](http://williammckeen.com)

**X / BlueSky / Threads:** @wmckeen

- John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (Knopf, 1946)
- Rick Jervis, *The Devil Behind the Badge* (Dey Street, 2024)
- Gilbert King, *Beneath a Ruthless Sun* (Riverhead, 2018)
- Lillian Ross, *Reporting Always* (Scribner, 2015)
- Cheryl Strayed, *Wild* (Random House, 2012)
- Lisa Taddeo, *Three Women* (Simon and Schuster, 2020)

Be well informed. At the very least, read the *Boston Globe* and the *New York Times* daily.

# Grading and related issues

There will be a lot of reading and a lot of writing. You will produce a research project on a storyteller and two experiments (along the lines of magazine pieces or extended features).

You also will write a weekly reading memo, lead a discussion of one of the books and perhaps write a couple of short assignments. *These things are done for credit*, but will not carry letter grades. The reading memos allow you to discuss the assigned readings as well as what you read on your phone during your commute.

Most of your final grade will be determined by your performance on the storyteller project and the two articles, as well as on your class participation.

It should go without saying that I expect you not to talk, dance or make rude noises while I am trying to lecture. Any sort of disruptive behavior will be damaging to your grade.

We follow the standard grading scale:

•	93 and up	A
•	90 to 92.99	A-
•	87 to 89.99	B+
•	83 to 86.99	B
•	80 to 82.99	B-
•	77 to 79.99	C+
•	73 to 76.99	C
•	70 to 72.99	C-
•	67 to 69.99	D+
•	60 to 66.99	D
•	0 to 59.99	F

**Due dates** Experiment No. 1: 02/28  
Experiment No. 2: 04/01  
Storyteller Project: 05/01

## Attendance

Attendance is critical. Come to class fully prepared to participate in a discussion based on the readings. We cannot have a successful class without you. Be here every day.

If you don't show up, the quality of class will be diminished.

Remember your John Donne (and, of course, remove the gender bias from this centuries-old quote):

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less.... (A)ny man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

In short, don't be a clod. But do be polite.

There's no excuse for rudeness.

You will not be allowed to make up any missed work unless the reason for your absence is extremely grave (a death in the family or perhaps the contraction of some loathsome disease), and you call me before the class period to be missed.

I have strong feelings about attendance. It would be stupid to walk into Urban Outfitters, pick out fifty pairs of pants, pay for them and tell the clerk, "Naw, you keep 'em."

Yet that's what we often do in college. As Herman B (no period) Wells, chancellor of Indiana University (my beloved alma mater) once said:

"Education is the one thing people pay for then do not insist upon receiving."

# The storyteller project

## The adopt-a-journalist plan

**Y**ou will do a project about a literary journalist. It can be any person whose work is featured in our bibliography. You can propose someone not on the bibliography, of course. I'll just need to approve it.

The project will be due at the end of the semester, but you may make a class presentation about your subject earlier in the term.

So pick your storyteller early and plunge into research.

It can take the form of a paper, a website, a podcast, or play. Maybe you can do it as a hologram.

First, pick a subject that interests you. You will have to live with the writer - figuratively, at least.

Second, *do interviews*. Alas, this only works with writers who are alive. If you are writing about a living writer, what the heck do you have to lose by reaching out.

Here are answers to questions you might ask:

**Style.** Consistency matters most. I recommend *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations* by Kate Turabian and Wayne C. Booth (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

As long as you are consistent and supply me with the necessary citations, I'll be jazzed. Include all relevant information in the endnote.

Thus: 47. Edna Buchanan, telephone interview, March 28, 2025.



**Truman Capote**, author of *In Cold Blood*

## READ IN THIS ORDER

- 01 **HERSEY** *Hiroshima*
- 02 **ROSS** *Reporting Always*
- 03 **CAPOTE** *In Cold Blood*
- 04 **DIDION** *The Year of Magical Thinking*
- 05 **COATES** *The Beautiful Struggle*
- 06 **GAY** *Hunger*
- 07 **STRAYED** *Wild*
- 08 **CULLEN** *Columbine*
- 09 **KING** *Beneath a Ruthless Sun*
- 10 **JERVIS** *The Devil Behind the Badge*
- 11 **FINKEL** *An American Dreamer*
- 12 **COOK** *The Quiet Damage*
- 13 **TADDEO** *Three Women*

**continued**

## The storyteller project **continued**

**Errors.** Fact errors damage your grade. Spelling and grammatical errors also hurt. Typographical errors will be considered spelling errors. It behooves you to edit your papers carefully.

**Revision.** I may ask you to revise your project. This will not affect the grade, but I will not record your grade -- give you credit for the work -- unless you turn in a revision if one is requested.

This rarely happens, but please don't insult your classmates and me by turning submitting sloppy work.

**General quality.** One last, vital thing: Do not think of this as "another boring class project." You are a student in a college of communication. You are supposed to be a writer. I will be judging your project as a piece of professional work. It *must* be interesting.

## Bibliography

There is an extensive bibliography available at the Courses tab of my website, [williammckeen.com](http://williammckeen.com).

Use it as a starter list for building a library of literary journalism.

Feel free to make suggestions for my bibliography. It is a work in progress, after all.

As we said before, to become a better storyteller, you need to understand and practice the craft.

Read a lot. You will improve.



**Jesselyn Cook**, author of *The Quiet Damage*



# Course schedule

We can't attach dates to these assignments because we want to make sure we have the time to explore the storytellers and their styles. But this is the order in which we will approach the material. The books are required. The articles, posted on Blackboard, are optional. But you should want to read them

## PART 1

### Pathfinders

John Hersey, Jessica Mitford, Ernie Pyle, Lillian Ross and Truman Capote

**Reading:** *Hiroshima* by John Hersey; "The Story of Captain Waskow" by Ernie Pyle; *Reporting Always* by Lillian Ross; "Checks and Balances at the Sign of the Dove" by Jessica Mitford; and *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote.

## PART 2

### The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight

Jimmy Breslin, Joan Didion, Nora Ephron, Barbara Goldsmith,  
Norman Mailer Gail Sheehy, Terry Southern, Gloria Steinem, Gay Talese,  
Hunter S. Thompson and Tom Wolfe

**Reading:** "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" by Gay Talese;; "Pandemonium With a Big Grin" by William McKeen; "Man in a White Suit" by William McKeen; "A Few Words About Breasts" by Nora Ephron; "Redpants and Sugarman" by Gail Sheehy; "Chitty and the Boohoo" by Hunter S. Thompson; "Truth is Never Told in Daylight" by William McKeen; "He Was a Crook" by Hunter S. Thompson; and "Splendor in the Short Grass" by Grover Lewis.

## PART 3

### Memory Artists

Ta-Nehisi Coates, Joan Didion, Roxane Gay and Cheryl Strayed

**Reading:** *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates; "A California Dream" by Joan Didion; *The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion; *Hunger* by Roxane Gay; *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed

## PART 4

### Telling True Stories

Jesselyn Cook, Dave Cullen, David Finkel, Rick Jervis, Gilbert King,  
Lisa Taddeo and a cast of thousands

**Reading:** *The Quiet Damage* by Jesselyn Cook; *Columbine* by Dave Cullen; *An American Dreamer* by David Finkel; *The Devil Behind the Badge* by Rick Jervis; *Beneath a Ruthless Sun* by Gilbert King; *Three Women* by Lisa Taddeo. Also: "Concentrated Evil" by William McKeen; "A Thousand Words About Terri Schiavo" by Kelley Benham; "Elvis: A Dossier" by Jon Bradshaw; and "The Falling Man" by Tom Junod.

# The honor roll

Here are some of the people we will study (or at least discuss) this semester. This is roughly the order in which we will consider them. Storytellers indicated with an asterisk are those whose work we are required to read. I encourage you to read the others on your own. (This is just a starter list.)



**Joan Didion**, author of *The Year of Magical Thinking*.

- Mark Twain
- Frederick Douglass
- Ring Lardner
- Zora Neale Hurston
- Nellie Bly
- Dorothy Parker
- Ernie Pyle
- John Hersey \*
- Martha Gellhorn
- Lillian Ross \*
- Marguerite Higgins
- Gay Talese
- Terry Southern
- Jimmy Breslin
- Gloria Steinem
- Tom Wolfe
- George Plimpton
- Truman Capote \*
- Joan Didion \*
- Norman Mailer
- Gail Sheehy
- J. Anthony Lukas
- Michael Herr
- Hunter S. Thompson
- Grover Lewis
- Jacqui Banaszynski
- Rick Bragg
- Anne Hull
- Thomas French
- Cheryl Strayed
- Dave Cullen \*
- Ben Montgomery
- Kelley Benham
- Roxane Gay \*
- Mary Roach
- Eli Saslow
- Ta-Nehesi Coates
- Gilbert King \*
- Debbie Cenziper
- John Woodrow Cox
- Lisa Taddeo\*
- Kelley Benham
- Lane DeGregory
- Mitchell Zuckoff
- Jesselyn Cook \*
- Barbara Goldsmith
- Melissa Fay Greene
- James Baldwin
- Joyce Maynard
- Elle Reeve
- Ted Conover
- Robyn Davidson
- Rick Jervis \*
- Michael Holley
- Malcolm Gladwell
- Erik Larsen
- Nora Ephron
- John McPhee
- Joseph Mitchell
- Marie Brenner
- Nathan McCall
- Gloria Emerson
- Katherine Boo
- David Grann
- Isabel Wilkerson
- Dick Lehr

## Honesty

BU has a student honor code. Know it. Take this pledge: "On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing the assignment." I will not tolerate cheating. If I discover that you have violated the honor code, I will do everything I can to boot you from the class and from the college. The Boston University academic conduct code is here: [www.bu.edu/academics/resources/academic-conduct-code/](http://www.bu.edu/academics/resources/academic-conduct-code/)



**Roxane Gay**, author of *Hunger*



**Dave Cullen**,  
author of *Columbine*

### About this syllabus

Consider this syllabus a contract. I've made promises I intend to keep. By not dropping the class, I assume you accept the conditions.

There are two guiding philosophers in my life: Elvis Presley, who said, "If this ceases to be fun, we will cease to do it," and my late, sainted mother, who said, "If we all liked the same thing, it would be a pretty dull world."

Those two great thinkers shape my approach to this course.

I hope this course deepens your interest in literary journalism and helps you understand the legacies of these storytellers.



# Some words about journalism

## Favorite fancy-pants or funny quotes

The purpose of journalism is to irritate, infuriate and inform.

**Jess Lewis Gardner III**

A student in the first class I ever taught

The past actually happened, but history is only what somebody wrote down.

**A. Whitney Brown**

Author and former 'Saturday Night Live' performer

All good research – whether for science or for a book – is a form of obsession.

**Mary Roach**

Science journalist

It is not death or torture or imprisonment that threatens us as American journalists. It is the trivialization of our industry.

**Ted Koppel**

Formerly of ABC News

The job of the newspaper is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

**Finley Peter Dunne**

Early 20th century journalist

The principal difference between a horse and a man is that you cannot rely on a horse to gather news.

**Mark Twain**

Who needs no introduction

I would be a journalist if for no other reason than I would rather drink with journalists than any other people on Earth.

**Hunter S. Thompson**

Doctor of Gonzo Journalism

I wouldn't be here if there were no trouble. Trouble is news, and gathering news is my job.

**Marguerite Higgins**

Celebrated war correspondent

Reporters aren't very bright as a general rule. I mean, most of us learn to write when we're kids. Then we go on to other things.

**Bobby Knight**

Retired basketball coach



**Ta-Nehisi Coates**, author of *The Beautiful Struggle*.

I would trust citizen journalism as much as I would trust citizen surgery.

**Morley Safer**

Formerly of CBS News

If you're good at it, you leave no fingerprints.

**Lillian Ross**

Longtime reporter for *The New Yorker*

Be outrageous, ridicule the fraidy-cats, rejoice in all the oddities that freedom can produce.

**Molly Ivins**

Former reporter and columnist

History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.

**Maya Angelou**

Poet, speaking at President Clinton's first inauguration

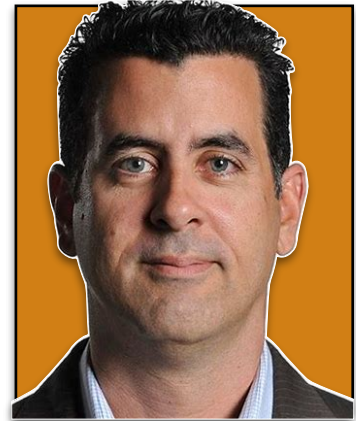
Journalism is printing what someone else does not want printed. Everything else in public relations.

**George Orwell**

British journalist and author

# Six things to know

**1. Sexual misconduct.** Boston University is committed to fostering a safe, productive learning environment. Title IX and our school policy prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, which regards sexual misconduct – including harassment, domestic and dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. We understand that sexual violence can undermine students’ academic success and we encourage students who have experienced some form of sexual misconduct to talk to someone about their experience, so they can get the support they need. Confidential support and academic advocacy resources can be found with the Center for Sexual Assault Response & Prevention (SARP) at <http://www.bu.edu/safety/sexual-misconduct/>.



**Rick Jervis**, author of *The Devil Behind the Badge*

**2. Equal opportunity.** BU has strict guidelines on classroom behavior and practices when it comes to treatment of students and guests on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, mental or physical disability, genetic information, military service, national origin, or due to marital, parental, or veteran status. Discrimination for any of these reasons is prohibited. Please refer to the [Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Policy](#) for more details.

**3. A positive classroom.** At your discretion, please alert me to anything related to preferred pronouns, preferred name or nickname, or any extenuating circumstances or trigger warnings (personal, medical, etc.) that might impact your classroom experience. I want to make sure you have the most positive experience in the classroom as possible. If work that gets shown in this class, professional or student-generated, offends you in anyway, please mention it in class or talk to us privately about it so that we can all learn from each other. This is not to say we will ever restrict freedom of speech or water down an aggressive or edgy idea, but we want to discuss anything that someone deems troublesome or offensive.



**David Finkel**, author of *An American Dreamer*.

**4. Disability and access services.** If you are a student with a disability or believe you might have a disability that requires accommodations, please contact the [Office of Disability and Access Services](#) (DAS) at 617-353-3658 to coordinate any reasonable accommodation requests. DAS is located at 25 Buick Street, on the third floor.

**5. Student athletes.** All student-athletes should be provided with a sheet from Student-Athlete Support Services regarding absences throughout the semester. These sheets should be handed in as soon as possible to avoid potential conflicts and so arrangements can be made to provide for missed lecture notes, classwork, or discussion.

**6. Academic code of conduct.** All BU students are bound by the [Academic Conduct Code](#). Please review to ensure you are acting responsibly and ethically in regard to your academics.



## Additional stuff

In addition to the resources listed above, please know that we are here to help you find the resources to help you get through stressful times.

### Support services

<https://www.bu.edu/com/resources/current-students/student-support/>

### COM Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

<https://www.bu.edu/com/about-com/diversity-equity-inclusion/>

### Newbury Center for First-Generation Students

<http://bu.edu/newbury-center>

### COM Writing Center

<https://www.bu.edu/com/for-current-students/the-com-writing-center/>

### Dean of Students office

<https://www.bu.edu/dos/>

Note: Any student who is experiencing food or housing insecurity and believes this may affect their performance in the course is urged to contact the Dean of Students for



**Lillian Ross** (right), author of *Reporting Always*, with Ernest Hemingway, subject of one of her most celebrated and controversial works.



**Cheryl Strayed**, author of *Wild*

# Instructor biography

I worked for newspapers and magazines before I started teaching. My first job, at *The Courier-Tribune* in Bloomington, Ind., lasted until that fine little newspaper went out of business. I was at *The Palm Beach Post* briefly and then joined *The American Spectator*, then served two years at *The Saturday Evening Post*. While at the *Post*, I helped edit a couple of books, including an anthology called *The American Story*.

Since I started teaching, I've taken several short term jobs – sometimes in the summers, sometimes night work on the copy desk during the school year – on *The Norman* (Okla.) *Transcript*, *The Courier-Journal* (Louisville, Ky.), *The Tampa Bay Times* and *The Gainesville* (Fla.) *Sun*. I've written reviews and features for *The Orlando Sentinel*, *The Tampa Bay Times* and *The Boston Globe* fairly regularly since 1989.

I earned a bachelor's in history and a master's in journalism from Indiana University, writing a historical survey of the portrayal of journalists in popular culture. I earned my Ph.D. in higher education administration from the University of Oklahoma, though that was largely a history degree.

Some of my books:

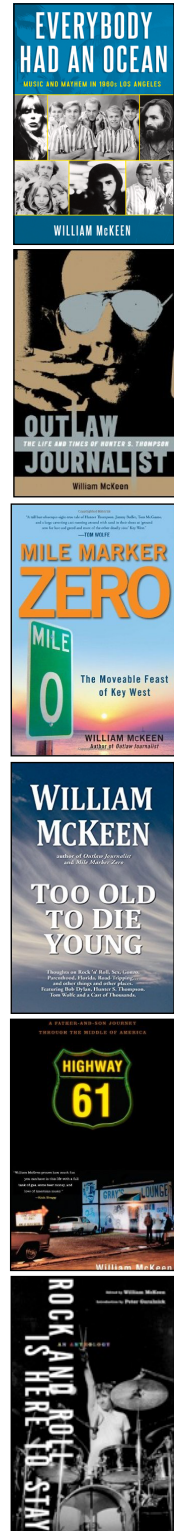
- *Everybody Had an Ocean* (Chicago Review Press, 2017) tells the story of the intersection of music and crime in the Los Angeles rock'n'roll world of the 1960s. Trigger warning: Charlie Manson content.
- *Too Old to Die Young* (Dredger's Lane, 2015) is a collection of articles, short stories, reviews and other stuff. I'm happy to have all this in one place.
- *Homegrown in Florida* (University Press of Florida, 2012) is a collection of stories about growing up in Florida. I edited the book, wrote a couple of stories, and got contributions from Tom Petty, Kristin Harmel, Carl Hiaasen, Michael Connelly, Anne Hull and many others.
- *Mile Marker Zero* (Crown Books, 2011) is about the writers, artists, actors and musicians who found their artistic identities in Key West. Trigger alert: sex, drugs and rock'n'roll.
- *Outlaw Journalist* (W.W. Norton, 2008) is a biography of Hunter S. Thompson. Christopher Hitchens, in *The Times* of London, called it "admirable" and "haunting."
- *Highway 61* (W.W. Norton, 2003) is a memoir of a 6,000-mile road trip with my eldest son. I think about that trip every day.
- *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay* (W.W. Norton, 2000) is an anthology tracing the history of popular music. A splendid time is guaranteed for all.

I have seven children – Sarah, a designer in New York; Graham, chief environmental officer for the Indiana University system; Mary, who works for a non-profit in Chicago; Savannah, a nurse in Newberry, Fla.; Jackson, an artist in residence at my residence; Travis, a business major and baseball player at Rivier University in New Hampshire; and Charley, a yet another business major and party animal at Miami University of Ohio. I also have six magnificent grandchildren: Mabel, Pearl, Rose, Myer, Vivienne and Westley..

Before coming to the Boston University Department of Journalism, I taught at Western Kentucky University for five years, the University of Oklahoma for four years, and the University of Florida for 24 years, the last dozen as department chairman. I've been at BU since 2010 and served as department chairman for 13 years.

Teaching this course is a great pleasure for me. I hope you enjoy the class.

*Wm. McKeen*



**Shameless plug:** I have seven children who'd like to go back to three meals a day. Feel free to purchase several copies to support this cause.