

**NON-FICTION NARRATIVE, STRUCTURE**  
**“How Good Books Are Built”**

JOUR-GA 1050.01  
3:30-7:00PM Room 652  
Fall 2015  
MICHAEL NORMAN

20 Cooper Square, Room 638  
New York, NY 10003  
212-998-7964

*8 South Brookwood Dr.*  
*Montclair NJ 07042*  
*973-744-2795 (AFTER 8 PM)*

michael.norman@nyu.edu  
Office hours: BY APPOINTMENT ONLY  
Tuesdays 10-11AM; 2-3 PM: After Class  
Office 638

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This is an advanced graduate seminar. We will read five books of original reporting, narratives selected for both their strengths and weaknesses.

We will critique the structure, the language, the development of the characters, the story line, the sequence of cause and effect that novelists call plot. We will look at how some authors take a non-fiction template and embroider it with fictional technique while others adopt the more difficult course of using fiction's conventions consistently from the opening sentence to the closing word.

We will attempt to answer the question: Does the material dictate the design of the book or is the design imposed on the material? Along the way we will consider: reporting and sources, background and historical research, standards of proof and verification, the practice of oral history, the uses of memoir and so on.

The course, however, turns on narrative structure and language. Every two weeks, you will be asked to codify the lessons in narrative structure you have learned from each narrative.

ASSIGNMENTS: Leading The Seminar

Each week two or three presenters will lead the seminar. They will:

- A) First, deliver a brief -- 5-10 minute -- biographical presentation on the author. You should devote no more than two minutes to the facts of the author's life -- all we want is some sense of how that life is shaped the author's work, if such is the case, and some sense of the "writing apprenticeship" the author served. The majority of the time should be spent on what that author said about her work or about writing in general. Finally, if you can discover a journal or diary by the author, you should deliver some of that to the seminar.
- B) This is to be followed by a discussion and critique of the reviews and articles generated at the time the book was published. (Copy and distribute AND read the best sections aloud.) This is important. We

want to know how the critics received the book and we want to cull from that criticism any useful general principles on language and structure.

C) Next, the presenters will present the book to the seminar, following the protocols set forth here:

1. Author bio first
2. Reviews and a critique of the reviews
3. A comprehensive overall discussion of structure, noting first the basic structural plan of the author, the structural devices that repeat throughout the book, i.e. how the book is organized in detail. Then **a chapter-by-chapter discussion of structure; i.e., exactly what work the author does in each chapter – scenes, characters -- how and when those scenes are set up and those characters introduced -- blocks of reporting or information. All of this should be carefully charted on paper (or in a PowerPoint presentation, either in lists or time/chapter lines or both – any scheme of presentation that suits you -- that you hand out to the class. This is really the heart of what we want to do.**
4. A “walk” through the book to examine language: all the aspects of language outlined in “A VERY BASIC GUIDE TO EXPLICATING TEXT.” You should look at: the narrative pacing and how it’s created, transitions, examples of recursive composition, thumbnail sketches of minor characters, moments of good description in the book, moments of well-wrought action and bits of exposition that explain things, processes or ideas.

D) The presenters will then critique the book -- suggest its weaknesses, its strengths, where and how it might be improved.

E) Throughout, the presenters will lead a class discussion of the book by posing a series of carefully framed questions. They will have a class list and will be calling on each member of the seminar across the day.

F) At the beginning of each class, a seminar member who is not part of the presenting team will be asked to deliver a grammar lesson based on the Johnson text. (See schedule at end of syllabus.)

### ASSIGNMENTS, Writing.

As you can see, starting in week three, the course is divided into five two-week modules, one narrative per module. On the **Thursday following the second week of each module (except the last week)**, you will post on NYU Classes, no later than 6PM, a 500 to 600-exegesis/essay w/proofs (You should always aim for 500 words) based on the following prompt: “Here are the basic lessons of narrative structure I learned from reading XXXXX by XXXXX.”

What I don’t want: note dumping and nothing more. What I want: use the notes you took during the two-week presentation and think on paper about the difficulties, problems, liabilities, and strengths of using the various structural techniques and designs we talked about in class. In other words, I want an

intelligent wrap-up of the module that includes your CAREFUL analytical thinking about what we are learning. Careful analysis, not critique, not opinion. NB: **Do not use the first person singular** and do not use that prohibition as an excuse to write passive sentences. I will be grading: A) the quality of your prose, B) the summary of what you have learned, C) your thinking on “the difficulties, problems, liabilities, and strengths of using the various structure techniques and designs we talk about in class.” I absolutely will not read papers longer than 600 words; exceed the limit, and you will automatically get an incomplete. I will not read papers that are filed on NYUClasses later than 6PM on the four Thursdays in question. Miss the deadline, you get an F for the assignment. Again, there is no paper due for the last book.

FINAL PAPER.

You must, at the end of the term, submit a 2,000-2500 word paper. Your choices are:

- A. A formal academic paper in which you compare the structure of three of the authors in the course, or you may take a general topic. You may also take one aspect of structure and write about it using all the books in the course. For example, you may want to talk about “persona” – the speaking voice, or narrator, the author uses to tell the story. There are many approaches you can take to this kind of paper.
- B. A modified book proposal on a topic of your choice. Here a student would attempt to apply the lessons of the course to a piece of reporting. The proposal should be written in three parts. First, a discursive section in plain language that describes the project and the reporting you have done and expect to do. Second a chapter by chapter outline. Third, the beginning of the first chapter (2,500 words). NB: **If you have not done your reporting already, you will not be able to exercise this option.**
- C. A monograph on one thing or one subject based solely on library research. This monograph would ostensibly be either an aside, digression or chapter in a book. An example of a monograph would be the first part of John McPhee's ORANGES or Chapter 7 in Kramer. Your monograph can be historical as well. The idea here is to take applied research -- so-called soft reporting -- and **create from it compelling narrative discourse.**

GRADES

- 100-95=A
- 94-90=A-
- 89-85=B+
- 84-80=B
- 79-75=B-
- 74-70=C+

Percentage of grade: Team Presentation.....	40%
Classroom participation..	10%
Lessons Learned.....	25%
Final Paper.....	25%

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Narratives:

1. The Last Cowboy, Jane Kramer (Coursepack supplied)
2. Oranges, John McPhee
3. My Traitors Heart, Rian Milan
4. The Duke of Deception, Geoffrey Wolff
5. Tears in the Darkness, Michael Norman and Elizabeth M. Norman

**YOU MUST USE THE EDITIONS IN THE UNIVERSITY BOOKSTORE. YOU MAY BUY THEM ELSEWHERE, BUT THEY MUST BE THE SAME EDITIONS.**

Others:

1. The Handbook of Good English, Edward Johnson. *{This book will be available in pdf on the class NYUClasses site.}*

RECOMMENDED

1. A Manual for Writers of Research Papers etc., Kate Turabian
2. Rhetoric of Fiction, Wayne C. Booth

---

SEMESTER SCHEDULE

(Subject to change)

Week 1 (9/8)

1. Class structure
2. Seminar protocols
3. Dialogue: What is literature? What is fiction? What is non-fiction? Can the literature of fact be art? Is the book in the reporting or the writing?
4. Beginnings, attacks, leads, approaches, openings
5. Seminar Presentation Assignments for the semester

Week 2 (9/15)

1. "Great Beginnings"
2. A Very Basic Guide To Explicating Text (whole thing)
3. Johnson
4. Samples of Structure

Week 3 (9/22)

1. Johnson
2. Kramer: THE LAST COWBOY.

Week 4 (9/29)

1. Johnson
2. Finish with THE LAST COWBOY (Paper due 10/1)

Week 5 (10/6)

1. Johnson
3. McPhee, ORANGES

Week 6 (10/20)

1. Johnson
2. Finish ORANGES (Paper due 10/22)

Week 7 (10/27)

1. Wolff, DUKE OF DECEPTION. (Presenters: a very brief history of the Civil Rights Movement with emphasis on Georgia; current status of movement.)
2. Johnson

Week 8 (11/3)

1. Finish DUKE OF DECEPTION (Paper due 11/5)
2. Johnson

Week 9 (11/10)

1. Johnson
2. Malan, MY TRAITOR'S HEART. (Presenters must include a short talk on the differences between memoir and autobiography. Use critical texts in library and be sure to list the differences between the two and give us some examples of each.)

Week 10 (11/17)

1. Johnson
2. Finish MY TRAITOR'S HEART (Paper Due 11/19)

Week 11 (11/24)

This is a catch-our-breath week. We have several choices. We can: do a writing workshop if you like, wherein the week before I send you on an assignment to describe something and we workshop your papers as a class. Or we can spend the session answering all questions left unanswered from the first four narratives, or we can also hold a open session on writing, structure and reporting during which you would bring to the table problems you are having with work for any other class, or, finally, I can hold office hours for three-four hours and meet with each student individually.

Week 12 (12/1)

1. Johnson
2. TEARS IN THE DARKNESS (NO PAPER)
3. Presenters: After reading the book, please try imagine the kind of background reading Berger/Hersey had to do to prepare to write a book that turned on the subject of medicine/atomic fission. What background reading would you have done?

Week 13 (12/8)

1. Finish TEARS IN THE DARKNESS (No "Lessons Learned" paper)

Week 14 (12/15)

1. Round table on future book projects (3-paragraph proposal)

2. Best book and why: a debate.
3. Individual assessment.

**FINAL PAPER DUE Friday December 18. No exceptions.**

**ALL Papers**, including the final, must be **double-spaced**, in a **12-point font**, **indented paragraphs**, with **page numbers**. Your name, assignment and date should be in the upper left-hand corner. **I will not read papers that are not properly formatted. If I receive one, I will deduct one letter grade and return it to you to format according to the above.**

---

**SIGN-UP SHEET**

- (T1\_Kramer) 1.  
 2.  
 3.
- (T2\_McPhee) 1.  
 2.  
 3.
- (T3\_Wolff) 1.  
 2.  
 3.
- (T4\_Malan) 1.  
 2.  
 3.
- (T5\_Norman) 1.  
 2.  
 3.
- 

**Johnson**

- Weeks 2-3 T-3 pp 1-12; 1.1-1.2 \_\_\_\_\_
- Weeks 4-5 T-4 pp 12-26; 1-3-1.6 \_\_\_\_\_
- Weeks 5-6 T-5 pp 26-47; 1.7-1.11 \_\_\_\_\_
- Weeks 7-8 T-1 pp 47-73; 1.13-1.20 \_\_\_\_\_
- Weeks 9-10 T-2 pp 73-94; 1.2102.2 \_\_\_\_\_

Your Weekly Tasks:

1. Make sure you have read the narrative twice. Once to get the story and the second time so you are prepared to talk about structure and language. The seminar leaders will be calling on you...or I will. Be fully prepared.

2. Make sure you have looked up any word you do not know from the assigned readings.
3. Review the literary concepts necessary to do our work. Either buy or consult a copy of M.H. Abrams A GLOSSARY OF LITERARY TERMS. Also review the explication guide in the “documents” section of BB.

Final Paper deadlines:

1. By 11/4 you must tell me what you intend for the final paper – earlier if you are sure you are going to write a first chapter and require advice on the reporting.
2. If you want feedback on the first part of your final paper, you must get me pages by 11/24. This is a good idea to make sure you’re on the right track.

All these deadlines mean that you will have to poke around in the five narratives almost immediately, this to decide which ones you will include in the paper. If you are writing a book chapter, obviously you are already behind; it must be based on original reporting.

If you were working on a memoir before you came to NYU, I will accept a chapter of that for the final paper, but that chapter must, absolutely must, include interviews and a schedule of interviews. If you intend a memoir you should immediately read *Inventing the Truth : The Art and Craft of Memoir* by William Zinsser (it’s in paperback).