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English 112B

Unit of Study Information

## **The Narrative of Everyday**

### **Unit of Study: Nonfiction and New Journalism**

#### Introduction to the Unit – Significance of New Journalism

The objectivity of newsprint and old journalism, while informing readers of particular subjects, often creates a more apathetic and distanced audience – what is the relevance of the news, if it’s just a compilation of numbers and observations that have no direct relations to the reader? Come the 1960s and 1970s, a handful of pioneers answered that question with a style: new journalism. A few magazines, such as *Esquire* or *The New Yorker*, began publishing articles that resembled that of a short story – a worldly issue, person, place, anything, was being mixed with narrative. The method was highly critiqued early on, but the magazines defended their articles. *Esquire* contrasted New Journalism with the old as “the basic unit of reporting was no longer the datum or piece of information but the scene. Scene is what underlies ‘the sophisticated strategies of prose.’” Since New Journalism’s birth, magazines and newspaper both desired more works of this technique to quench the thirst of its buzzing consumers. The people could not get enough of the style. Informative, yet subjective; extensively factual, yet full of truisms; honest, and persuasive.

I would almost argue that students may not share the same perspective as the founders and appreciators of the non-fiction revolution. Fiction inherently promises imagination, innovation, and seemingly boundless opportunities to convey thoughts and stories in

experimental methods – nonfiction and journalism perhaps still carry some of their stigmas of being cut-and-dry and unmalleable. But this misconception is precisely what this unit of study seeks to clarify, that nonfiction allows authors to exhibit their skills as writers, as well create compelling narratives, voices, research, and techniques that bring out the most out of a peculiar subject.

This unit of study will open with Gay Talese’s feature story “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold.” Considering that the piece is fairly long, I will be extracting key passages that show the techniques Talese used in making the story work. Despite never directly interviewing Frank Sinatra, Talese was able to compile five years of observing Sinatra’s character at various social events; interviews with Sinatra’s friends, family, and workers; media portrayals and behind-the-scene depictions of Sinatra; Talese’s own involvement in assembling his sources; and references to relevant popular culture. Talese showed that journalism was not just a procedure of interview followed by regurgitation, rather, allowed for writers to take creative liberties on the realities around them, to explain the world through their eyes. This is to encourage students to consider the limitless possibilities in looking for a story around their own lives, if they are willing to invest themselves in producing the story to both entertain and inform. The element of realness in nonfiction offers a more authentic relationship between reader, author, and subject, which I believe fiction can never truly offer – of course, fiction is not to be discredited in this unit of study.

Every feature story in this unit of study serves as an entertaining proof of how nonfiction articles exist in the literary world today. Stories such as Michael Paterniti’s “The Suicide Catcher,” takes readers to China’s Yangtze Bridge, where 200,000 suicides occur every year – a few prevented by a local townsman who has taken it upon himself to give pep talks and

inspiration to the hopeless. It is both the story of the suicide catcher, and the concept of suicide, as Paterniti spends haunting months in China thinking over the significance of both matters. The audience is given a chance to see the scenes, as well as an invitation into the writer's wracking mind. On the lighter side, feature stories from writers such as a Jonah Weiner's "Kanye West has a Goblet," follows Talese's article in a similar way – a profile piece, without interviewing the subject. Kanye denies interviews from all sources, stating "I won't let an interviewer make an ass out of me – only Kanye can make an ass of himself." Weiner capitalized on the quote. Grabbing Kanye's Twitter feed, Facebook comments and pictures, media appearances and scandals, he invented a story as though he were shadowing Kanye the entire time, witnessing his day to day life. And he does indeed, let Kanye make an ass of himself by himself.

The point is, what nonfiction is today is both a lucrative writing market, as well as a style of writing that calls for writers to defamiliarize the world into something grander, through each author's unique perspective. Students benefit from combining their own stories with the world, as each writing project takes into account their approach, their ingenuity, and their voice.

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## **Beginning the Nonfiction Unit**

### **I. Introduce the concept of the Rhetorical Triangle**

- A. Author (Position on the Subject)
- B. Audience (Targeted Market and Factors)
- C. Subject (How far it initially is from the Audience, and how close it is to the Author)

II. The area within the circle is considered "the story." How well a story is constructed brings all three points of the triangle closer to each other. Essentially, the Rhetorical Triangle will be employed after each reading of an article, testing students whether they can find the main points of each story.

III. Begin reading Gay Talese's "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" – sections of it will suffice, particularly the first few pages. Have students read parts of the feature article, then proceed to read the introduction the next class section.

IV. Get students to respond to what they appreciated from the piece, and what parts of Talese's style made the story stand out (use of transitions, imagery, etc.)

V. Explain significance and history of New Journalism (the founders, the difference between hard and new journalism, how Talese compiled his research for this piece, what the market is currently like for new journalism.)

### **Further into Nonfiction, and Student Involvement with their Writing**

I. Begin reading Jonah Weiner's "Kanye West has a Goblet." Briefly explain Kanye's character, as well as the method Weiner used to create his story.

II. Have students discuss what they liked about the piece, first with the Rhetorical Triangle, then with their responses to certain scenes and Weiner's methodology.

III. Assign students a small feature story assignment, where they employ the same method Weiner used with his article (utilizing social media to create a seemingly real interview or shadowing on a celebrity.) Students are encouraged to use celebrities as their subjects. Because the writing is geared towards popular culture, students do not need to use scholarly articles for the article. Their writing should be evaluated at how clear the Rhetorical Triangle is within their story, how they construct their story, as well as how they assimilated themselves into the piece (voice.)

IV. Utilize this procedure for the other readings, but each assignment will pertain to the style and theme of the read article.

A. Michael Paterniti's "The Suicide Catcher" – Have students write an article based on a trip somewhere. The story should have two narratives: one about some particular event during the trip, and the other more on the writer's reflection about the event's significance. This essay develops a student's voice within an article.

B. Ben Ehrenreich's "The End" – Have students write an article that contains something procedural with the narrative. This essay asks students how much they understand something, and how they can explain it in an informative and entertaining way.

C. Mark Leibovich's "The Man the White House Wakes Up To" – Have students write an article of someone they find to constantly have a full schedule, and mystify the character through their packed days. This essay looks for how much they can expand on a subject.

D. Mischa Berlinski's "Vengeance LaFrance is Not Dead" – Have students write an article about a place they've visited. Students should provide historical context along with their personal narratives, to give readers a glimpse into that location. This essay develops a student's ability to incorporate facts in their writing.

E. Chris Jone's "Breathless," Craig Vetter's "Icarus 2010," and Robert Sanchez's "The Crash" – Have students observe a picture or video of some extreme sport or activity, and write an article that focuses on the scene, as well as a brief explanation of the sport in its entirety (history, procedure, etc.) This essay tests a student's sight, and how they receive the observation.

### **Concluding the Unit**

I. Now that students have gotten a feel for the various ways and angles nonfiction writing can take, they will participate in a final essay activity.

A. Have students write down a subject on a note card.

B. Gather all cards up, and shuffle the topics. Have each student draw a topic without looking at what they will be assigned to write on.

C. Go through each student, and pretend to be an editor from a certain magazine (GQ, The Atlantic, The New Yorker, etc.) Have students write down the magazine agency, and write as though they were going to send the piece to that magazine's editor. This piece will be a longer assignment, and will test what the student has learned throughout the entire unit of study – aside from the topic and magazine, they are free to approach the piece however way they want.

D. If a student absolutely dislikes their combination, they are able to choose to free write or draw again from the pile (extra topics will be added to increase the possibilities.)

Ultimately, while it is beneficial and essential to have students focus on their conventions and formal writing, nonfiction writing offers them the freedom to explore topics they want to develop without sacrificing too much of the research paper-like format. The readings and activities are to expose students to good writing, as well as experimental writing, so they can break out of the standardized five paragraph structure that loses creativity and personalization in the writing.

## Works Cited

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