

LT 230: Write What You *Don't* Know

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Office Hours: By appointment

Course Description

What happens when we flip the usual adage of “Write what you know” on its head? In this course, students will seek to imagine, understand, and describe those people and places that are far different from their own—and discover the possibilities of reading and writing outside of the familiar or comfortable. Together, we will read a range of non-fiction literature—on life in far-flung foreign locales, hardship and deprivation in the American inner city, among other selections—in which authors have purposely put themselves in unknown or unfamiliar situations, to varying results. Some encounters produce insight and empathy; others reveal how broad the gap in experience can be. Can the act of reporting and writing bridge this divide, or does it remain impassible? Led by Joshua Yaffa, writer for *The New Yorker* and Bard College Berlin’s writer-in-residence, students will consider their own relationship to foreign, strange, unfamiliar, and even challenging settings and subjects. The course will center on a close reading of a selection of non-fiction and journalistic texts; students will then embark on reporting and writing assignments of their own.

Requirements

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Accommodations

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of April 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, (accommodations@berlin.bard.edu) to request an official accommodation.

Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement.

If you have already been approved for accommodations with the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, please arrange to meet with me outside of class so that we can develop an implementation plan.

Students may face extenuating circumstances related to various personal or external factors, which impact their academic performance. While these circumstances often do not fall within the legal framework of Disability Accommodations, Bard College Berlin is committed to supporting students experiencing such circumstances. A student needing a short extension or a replacement assignment because of an extenuating circumstance is encouraged to make arrangements directly with instructors if possible. If further support is needed, please visit the [Bard College Berlin Accessibility page](#). Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker (j.harker@berlin.bard.edu) or Maria Anderson-Long (m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu).

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation. If you must miss class for religious observance, an athletic trip, or an official extra-curricular event, please let me know at the beginning of the semester so those absences can be excused. If you become seriously ill or if a personal family emergency will cause you to miss more than two classes, please let me know as soon as possible. Bard College Berlin does not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Grading and assignments

Class Participation

Discussion and participation are essential to the overall success of this course. Each week, you are required to participate in a discussion about the readings. We will engage in conversation, responding to one other, and add additional information or thoughts about the relevant readings. It will be your responsibility to come to class ready, having read the texts assigned and willing to take part in analyzing, debating, and expanding on the ideas contained therein. On a rotating basis, a small group of students (two to three people per session) will be responsible for leading the discussion of the week's readings. While this group will act as moderators of the given week's class discussion, they are not its only participants—all of us are. This grade will also reflect your level of investment in classroom discussion. (20% of grade)

"As Told To" Oral History

We will read (and listen) to a number of "as told to" first-person narratives and then create our own, of 800-1000 words. During class we will discuss format and technique, and there will be a high degree of flexibility

and openness in choice of subject and approach to telling their story in their own voice. (20% of grade)

Short Report on Place

For this writing assignment you will observe a place you identify as representing an unfamiliar, strange, maybe even intimidating or uncomfortable, environment, and write a short essay of 800-1000 words describing its sights, sounds, smells, and so on. You may engage as an active, present reporter and interact with people in this setting, but that is not required. It can merely be a detailed, vivid, finely observed portrait of a place. We will read examples of this kind of essay, as well. I will also discuss in more detail how you might approach this essay, which is meant more as a reporting and writing exercise in preparation for the final essay below rather than an intensive or all-consuming text. (20% of grade)

Final Reported Essay

This essay will represent the culmination of our work together this semester. You will find a character (or set of characters) and/or location, neighborhood, or other setting that in some way represents something new, foreign, and outside your own personal experience, background, or however you choose to define what you “don’t know” on the basis of your familiarity and comfort. (We will have a quick pitch session in class in which we will tell one another of our intended subjects before we embark on this reporting and writing assignment.) You will spend time immersing yourself and communicating with the inhabitants of this environment. In other words, as opposed to the shorter essay above, this will require more active reportorial engagement from your side: you will have to introduce yourself, ask questions, involve yourself in the life and comings and goings of the place and people about which you are writing. Multiple visits will presumably be required; this is unlikely to be an assignment you can complete in an afternoon. The goal is to enter into and begin to understand an unfamiliar world, and then, with that knowledge, tell us about what you have observed and learned. I will be available outside of class hours to offer advice and guidance to those needing it. The final length is not so important but you should aim for a text (you can all it a

piece of reportage, an essay, whatever you like) of no less than 2,000 words and certainly no more than 5,000, probably somewhere right in between. You are encouraged to form writing groups to discuss your drafts with each other. We will discuss the precise timeline for this essay as the semester develops. (40% of grade)

Classroom policies

Cell Phones and Notebooks

Cell phone noises can disturb interaction, dialogue, and concentration of the whole class. Cell phones must be shut off upon entrance to the classroom; texting is not allowed. If you need to text or call, you must ask for permission to step out of the class. Laptops and notebooks are generally not permitted (exceptions are for when they are needed for presentations of the readings or written assignments). Any kind of recording during class is forbidden.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students will receive feedback for their course work during and at the end of the semester. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Course structure

Session 1: January 26

Introduction and discussion: what do we know, what do we not know?

Students will introduce themselves and become acquainted with the instructor and the overarching themes of the class. What themes, places, communities do we not know—but would like to? What excites, intrigues, challenges us? What are the potential pitfalls, dangers, and blind spots we should be aware of? Students will share their own ideas and goals for what they want out of the course and where they expect to be challenged. We'll also go over some ideas of how we might write for this class—perhaps a very different style than the academic approach favored in other classes.

“A Solitary Human Voice,” *Voices From Chernobyl*, Svetlana Alexeivich

Session 2: February 2

Empathy, engagement, listening

We will discuss and respond to the week's readings, with a goal of understanding how the respective authors approached the task of listening, recording, and retelling the stories of their subjects. Do these first-person narratives sound genuine, convincing, and real? Why or why not? Do you think the reporter and writer was comfortable, or not so much, during the process? What about the subject? And what is the role of editing and authorial voice in such pieces? In the second half of class, we will prepare for our own assignment to craft a similar first-person oral history. We will discuss what kind of subjects we might consider and how we can go about the reporting process.

Selections from:

“Working” by Studs Terkel

Svetlana Alexeivich

The New Yorker “As Told To”

(distributed by instructor)

Session 3: February 9

The promise and (potential) pitfalls of reporting

We will discuss the process of reporting the oral-history assignment. What challenges are you encountering? Any questions before the piece of writing is due next week? Next we will turn to this week's readings as we turn continue our examination of the course's central themes: how outsiders encounter unfamiliar, foreign, uncomfortable places and people and emerge with a deeper understanding they share with readers. This is the first week when students will moderate the discussion. Some questions to consider: how did the reporter-writers gain access and trust of their subjects? Does this feel like a fair and honest exchange? Are there certain things the outsider might observe or pick up on as important that an insider might miss? What about the opposite? As students begin to think of themselves as reporters, what will they keep in mind?

Readings:

"Among the Thugs" Bill Buford

"Out There Part I," *The New Yorker*, William Finnegan

"The Trials of Alice Goffman" *The New York Times Magazine*, Gideon Lewis Kraus

Session 4: February 16

Places we don't know

We will begin by hearing students read their first-person oral histories aloud. Everyone will read at least one of the short assignments in class: half will read this week, half will read the essay on place that will be assigned this week. (Students themselves will choose to read now or later, but everyone will read once: not zero, not twice. Once!) Then we will discuss the week's readings: descriptions of place that, in various ways and contexts, represent a foreign or unfamiliar setting for the writer. How do these writers engage with their surroundings? What do they notice? What do they miss? Do you feel like you "get" how the place works and functions, do you sense its sights and smells? Finally, we will discuss your next assignment: a short reported essay of 800-1000 words in which you visit and spend time in a place that you don't know and that doesn't represent you—that is, a new and foreign place.

Readings:

"The Magic Mountain," *Harper's*, Matthew Power,

"Our Town," *The New Yorker*, Larissa MacFarquhar

"Slouching Toward Bethlehem" and "Marrying Absurd," Joan Didion

Session 5: February 23

People unlike myself: strangers nearby

This week we are reading articles in which the writer deeply embedded with a person or set of characters living vastly different lives than his or her own, and produced a work of penetrating journalism as a result. All these texts are set in various parts of the United States, at different times and with disparate communities; the hope is that by encountering people whose lives are made up of very different concerns and priorities than our own, we might gain a better sense of the world they inhabit—for those in the U.S. (that means your instructor!) a life that exists right under our noses, but is often out of sight. Do these texts create a sense of empathy or connection? How might they be different if they were, for example, first person memoirs written by members of these communities? As ever, we're interested in the role, gaze, and attention of the outsider, and what is gained and lost in their role as reporter and narrator. We'll also spend a moment and discuss your work-in-progress assignments on place.

Readings:

"Out There Part II," *The New Yorker*, William Finnegan

"Invisible Child," *The New York Times*, Andrea Elliot

"The Marriage Cure," *The New Yorker*, Katherine Boo

Session 6: March 2

Stories from abroad

Students will begin this week by reading aloud their reported essays on place. The half of class that did not read two weeks ago will read this

week; those who did read previously will not. We'll have a chance to discuss how this experience went for everyone: did you feel comfortable? Uncomfortable? How much time was required to begin to feel like you understood your chosen settings? Then we'll discuss this week's theme: individuals and communities that, to the writers, are foreign by definition. In such cases, everything is unfamiliar, from custom and culture to geography. In an way, this is the clearest or most obvious way to encounter the unknown: go somewhere faraway and meet people unlike yourself.

"The Grand Tour," *The New Yorker*, Evan Osnos

"Learning to Speak Lingerie," *The New Yorker*, Peter Hessler

Session 7: March 9

When the familiar becomes unfamiliar (or vice versa)

Often what we don't know is far closer than we realize. Sometimes that can be a function of geography (we don't imagine who or what is on the other side of the fence) and other times of imagination (a foreign land or people have more in common with us than we realize). We'll start with a discussion of what that might mean for our own lives, and then we'll turn to the readings, which highlight exactly this dynamic: what happens when we look for the other among what we already know?

Readings TBD

Session 8: March 16

Final project pitch session

This week's class will function as a pitch session for the final project of the semester: a reported essay from inside a new and unknown (to you personally) community of your choosing in Berlin. For this assignment, you will spend a considerable amount of time embedding with an individual or group of individuals who represent a foreign, unfamiliar, strange, world. You will spend time immersing yourself and communicating with the inhabitants of this environment. You will be putting into practice the idea of writing what you don't know, and preparing an essay of the type we have been reading this semester. The readings this week are all by

your instructor: not because they are so brilliant or successful, but rather because they give you a chance to ask questions of craft and process about how such pieces of writing come together.

Readings:

Excerpts from “Between Two Fires: Truth, Ambition, and Compromise in Putin’s Russia,” Joshua Yaffa

Selected articles from *The New Yorker*

Session 9: March 23

The Berlin we know—and don’t

In this last class before break, we will consider stories that illuminate less visible or unknown aspects of the city in which we all live: Berlin. The idea is to relate in a new way to a familiar place, and in so doing, train ourselves to see and experience the world differently. What is right under your nose, which you might not know about, but would like to? Carry that spirit with you over our two-week break.

“Piecing Together the Secrets of the Stasi,” *The New Yorker*, Burkhard Bilger

“Monuments to the Unthinkable,” *The Atlantic*, Clint Smith

“The Last Trial,” *The New Yorker*, Elizabeth Kolbert

Session 10: April 13

Immersing yourself with the unknown

There’s no simple way around it: in order to understand the other and relay this knowledge in writing, you often have to go deep, very deep, in embedding yourself in a foreign community or subculture. This approach potentially contains rich rewards, but also contains dangers and pitfalls. It’s not easy to give up your time and in some cases sense of self to immerse yourself in an unfamiliar world. Are the payoffs worth it? At what cost? This week we will discuss the lengths some reporters go to penetrate such worlds, and whether we think such an approach is feasible, desirable, and worthwhile.

Readings:

“My Four Months as Private Prison Guard,” *Mother Jones*, Shane Bauer

“The Dream Boat,” *The New York Times Magazine*, Luke Mogelson

Session 11: April 20

Guest speaker TBD

Session 12: April 27

Behind the Beautiful Forevers

This book, by Katharine Boo, is the one full book-length work we will read this semester, a detailed, novelistic tale of life in an impoverished neighborhood in Mumbai. We will read this book in chunks over the course of the semester—you will be given reading targets throughout—but this class session will be devoted entirely to discussing the book, its themes and characters, and how the writer embedded in such an unfamiliar environment to write such a penetrating work. How do the characters come alive as complicated, three-dimensional people? What lessons are there for our own approach to our subjects? Note: this is the only book for the course you will be required to purchase.

“Behind the Beautiful Forevers,” Katharine Boo

Session 13: May 4

Newsroom visit

We’ll visit the Berlin editorial offices of *Die Zeit*, to speak with writers and editors about how they approach their own work telling the stories of “other” communities and individuals. Students will have a chance to hear a diversity of opinions and strategies as how *Die Zeit* editors and journalists conceptualize and carry out this task. There will be plenty of time for questions and dialogue. Students will also be expected to explain, and get feedback, on their in-process final projects for class.

Selected *Die Zeit* articles TBD

Note: FINAL ASSIGNMENTS DUE BY 5PM WEDNESDAY MAY 13