

\*\*\*\*NOTE: THIS IS BEST SEEN AS AN OUTLINE. THE SYLLABUS IS SUBJECT TO A GREAT DEAL OF IMPROVISATION BASED ON THE NATURE AND COMPOSITION OF THE CLASS\*\*\*\*

*Tunku Varadarajan*

## **WRITING FOR A WIDE READERSHIP**

Room: 7<sup>th</sup> Floor Library, NYU Journalism School (20 Cooper Sq.)

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Office Hours: By Appointment (I am usually likely to be available just after class).

**Writing for A Wide Readership** is grounded in the idea that expertise is a wasted (and often unlabeled) thing if not shared with non-experts. The purpose of the course is to help you, the budding expert/specialist, learn how to write for the public -- people outside your academic discipline. You will work on writing that is rigorous, but never jargon-riddled or obscure; accessible to readers who don't share your water-cooler; and compelling to people with little previous knowledge of its subject.

This class is a workshop, which means that you will have several writing assignments during the semester: I estimate a minimum of 11 in 15 weeks. You must come to class prepared not only to discuss your own work, but also to evaluate your classmates' writing.

The writing assignment will be due no later than the morning of the day before class. You will email it to me (and post it on a shared Google Document). Come prepared to discuss it in class. You have to have read your classmates' work before class, too, so you can all critique each other.

Class participation is 25% of your grade. The other 75% is based on your writing.

I am available after class hours by appointment, and always available on email.

The syllabus will be sent to you in installments by email. This allows me to be flexible.

\*\*\*Always bring your laptop to class\*\*\*

Class Motto: WRITING IS TOO IMPORTANT TO BE ANYTHING BUT FUN.

### ***Week 1: January 28***

Reading (to be done before class):

Excerpt from "The Common Reader," Virginia Woolf

<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91c/chapter1.html>

'Prof, No one is reading you'

<http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/prof-no-one-is-reading-you>

Kurosawa on writing:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r-McmgQbee0>

Welcome to the "Writing for Wide Readership" class.

Introductions. Please prepare to describe yourself to the class: your academic background, your reasons for taking this class, your future plans.

Think about: What does a “wide audience” mean? What is expertise?

Assignment (no written submission required): Please identify ONE recently published piece that you think is a good—or bad—example of how to write for a wide audience. And be prepared to explain why you think so. You can source it from anywhere, including online, but be sure that the publication is intended for a *general readership*. (i.e., The New York Times or The Economist is OK, for instance; The Clinical Nurse Specialist or The Grumpy Economist is not!)

## ***Week 2: February 4 : LETTERS TO THE EDITOR***

Guest: Tim Lemmer, Letters Editor, The Wall Street Journal.

Reading (to be done before class): George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language"  
<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/orwell46.htm>

Writing assignment [Due by 9AM, Feb. 3]: Letter to the Editor

In-class Workshop: Letter to the Editor

Think about: The difference between “letters” and “comments” (online).

## ***Week 3: February 11 : THE OP-ED***

Guest: Josh Greenman, Op-ed editor, New York Daily News

### **Reading:**

'How to...' guides can often be hokey, but there's no harm in reading these two:

“A Few Tips for Opinion Piece Writers,” Andrew Leigh (for Australians, but the advice applies universally):

[http://people.anu.edu.au/andrew.leigh/pdf/OpEd\\_Tips.pdf](http://people.anu.edu.au/andrew.leigh/pdf/OpEd_Tips.pdf)

This one is written for Duke University faculty:

[http://newsoffice.duke.edu/duke\\_resources/oped](http://newsoffice.duke.edu/duke_resources/oped)

Here are a few op-eds to look at for guidance/inspiration:

The College Rankings Racket, by Joe Nocera

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/29/opinion/nocera-the-silly-list-everyone-cares-about.html>

Where the Gods Live On...and On, by Tunku Varadarajan

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/14/opinion/tendulkar-finally-retires-from-cricket.html>

Treat the Patient, Not the CT Scan, by Abraham Verghese

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/27/opinion/27verghese.html>

Gunning for Google, by Richard A. Epstein

<http://www.politico.eu/article/eu-google-hunt-ill-conceived/>

**Assignment:** Write a 600-800-word op-ed, including an attractive 'hed' [headline]. Copy to be submitted to me by 9AM on Feb. 10.

**Think about:** What is 'opinion'? How is it different, if at all, from 'analysis'? What is 'bias'? What is 'ideology'?

### **WEEK 3 | Feb. 18 | The Op-ed- II**

### **WEEK 4 | Feb. 25 | The Book Review**

*Assignment: Write a book review of ANY book you have read, new or old. Don't review from memory, but actually read/re-read the book. 700-900 words, to be posted in the Google Doc by 9 AM on Feb. 24.*

Writing Book Reviews: A guide, from the University of Indiana, Bloomington  
[http://www.indiana.edu/%7Ewts/pamphlets/book\\_reviews.shtml](http://www.indiana.edu/%7Ewts/pamphlets/book_reviews.shtml)

John Updike's rules for reviewing books  
<http://biblioklept.org/2010/04/14/john-updikes-rules-for-reviewing-books/>

The Art of the Book Review | Michael Lind  
<http://thesmartset.com/the-art-of-the-book-review/>

### REVIEWS TO READ

Being Mortal—By Atul Gawande  
Reviewed in The Guardian: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/22/being-mortal-medicine-what-matters-atul-gawande-review>  
& The New York Review of Books: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/01/08/better-way-out/>

Finding Zero—By Amir Aczel: [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/21/science/finding-zero-a-long-journey-for-naught.html?rref=collection%2Fcolumn%2Fscience-books&action=click&contentCollection=science&region=stream&module=stream\\_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=10&pgtype=collection](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/21/science/finding-zero-a-long-journey-for-naught.html?rref=collection%2Fcolumn%2Fscience-books&action=click&contentCollection=science&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=10&pgtype=collection)

American Vertigo—By Bernard-Henri Levy:  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/29/books/review/29keillor.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/29/books/review/29keillor.html?_r=0)

Finally, remember that book reviews are subjective. Here, just for fun, some excerpts of negative reviews of literary masterpieces:

“*Lolita*, then, is undeniably news in the world of books. Unfortunately, it is bad news. There are two equally serious reasons why it isn't worth any adult reader's attention. The first is that it is dull, dull, dull in a pretentious, florid and archly fatuous fashion. The second is that it is repulsive.” — Orville Prescott, *The New York Times*, 1958

“Mr. Melville is evidently trying to ascertain how far the public will consent to be imposed upon. He is gauging, at once, our gullibility and our patience. Having written one or two passable extravagancies, he has considered himself privileged to produce as many more as he pleases, increasingly exaggerated and increasingly dull.... In bombast, in caricature, in rhetorical artifice — generally as clumsy as it is ineffectual — and in low attempts at humor, each one of his volumes has been an advance among its predecessors.... Mr. Melville never writes naturally. His sentiment is forced, his wit is forced, and his enthusiasm is forced. And in his attempts to display to the utmost extent his powers of “fine writing,” he has succeeded, we think, beyond his most sanguine expectations... We have no intention of quoting any passages just now from *Moby-Dick*. The London journals, we understand, “have bestowed upon the work many flattering notices” and we should be loth to combat such high authority. But if there are any of our

noises, and we should be able to combat such high authority. But if there are any of our readers who wish to find examples of bad rhetoric, involved syntax, stilted sentiment and incoherent English, we will take the liberty of recommending to them this precious volume of Mr. Melville's." — *New York United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, 1852

Week 5: The Blog

Week 6: Why I Write: A personal statement for public consumption

Joan Didion, "Why I Write"

<http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/uploadedFiles/schools/whitmanhs/academics/english/Why%20I%20Write%20Didion.pdf>

George Orwell, "Why I Write"

[http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/wiw/english/e\\_wiw](http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/wiw/english/e_wiw)

**Discussion** of Didion and Orwell essays of the same title: Why do we write?

500-word submission.

Week 7: PITCH FOR LONG FORM PIECE

Week 8:

A PERSON DESCRIBED: Profiles, obituaries and interviews

[Please mail in your 1000-word piece--either profile, obituary, or interview--by March 29]

Readings:

*Profile:*

Angela Merkel / The New Yorker

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/12/01/quiet-german>

*Obituary:*

Margaret Thatcher in the Economist

<http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21576081-margaret-thatcher-britains-prime-minister-1979-1990-died-april-8th-age>

Oriana Fallaci in The Atlantic

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/12/she-said-what-she-thought/305377/>

*Interview*

Paul Theroux / Wall Street Journal

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB122066012828905783>

Milton & Rose Friedman / Wall Street Journal

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB115352827130914276>

Frank Gehry / Wall Street Journal

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB116683600262058277>

WEEK 9: LONG-FORM PITCH

WEEK 10: TWEETING

We will have the terrific Brian Ries of CNN [<https://twitter.com/moneyries>] as a guest. (He's cc'd here.)  
[LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/briankries>]

Do read:

<https://jfturcotte.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/heine-and-turcotte-2012-tweeting-as-statecraft1.pdf>

&

<http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/02/the-unbearable-lightness-of-tweeting/385484/>

Also, spend a couple of hours studying (1) Donald Trump's Twitter feed. How does he use the medium? How does he engage a wide audience? & (2) these two feeds: [https://twitter.com/bill\\_easterly](https://twitter.com/bill_easterly) and <https://twitter.com/neiltyson>

In addition, think of a Twitter feed that you regard as doing a good job of reaching a wide audience. Come prepared to talk about it.

WEEK 11: Nilita Vachani piece

WEEK 12: One-on-One

WEEK 13: Writing for a foreign reader

WEEK 14: LONG FORM