

# Writing 2: Writing Biography

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## Course Description:

In this course you choose your own adventure and create a biographical writing project based on self-directed research. At the beginning of the course, each student will propose a person to research, as we learn about the history, genres, and ethics of biographical writing. Much of this course is dedicated to biographical research, and learning scholarly and journalistic research methods. During the last four weeks of the course, students will draft, workshop, and revise a long-form piece of research-based biographical writing.

This is an online asynchronous course with no set class meeting times or required synchronous activities. The curriculum is designed to facilitate flexible coursework throughout the week, so that you can learn at your own pace and develop skills for self-directed research.

Each week, there are reading and writing assignments, as well as discussion threads in which we can share our ideas and communicate with others about their research projects. Discussion threads count as participation in the course, and must be contributed to by Wednesday evenings. At the end of each unit of the course, all homework will be compiled and submitted in the form of a writing portfolio for assessment and feedback.

## Graded Assignments:

Participation 20%

- 5 Discussion Threads
- 5 Peer-Editing Sessions

Unit I Portfolio: Project Proposal 20%

- Reading Responses 1-4
- Research Proposal Questionnaire
- Research Proposal

Unit II Portfolio: Biographical Research 20%

- Annotated Bibliography
- Peer Editing Work from Unit II
- Biographical Timeline
- Final Project Proposal

Unit III Portfolio: Biography Project 40%

- Biography Project Outline
- Peer Editing Work from Unit III
- Biography Project Draft
- Biography Project Revision

Student Resources

Course Overview:

Unit I: Introduction to Biographical Writing

**Week One: The Ethics of Biography**

Key Terms: Ethics, Biography

Readings: Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman*; Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes (excerpt); Julie Miller, [“Is Hulu’s \*Pam & Tommy\* Exploiting Pamela Anderson All Over Again?”](#) (Vanity Fair); Fresh Air, [“‘All That Heaven Allows’ Examines Rock Hudson’s Life As A Closeted Leading Man”](#) (NPR); Leslie Kaufman, [“The Quandary for Biographers: Get Up Close, but How Personal?”](#) (New York Times)

**Discussion Thread 1 [DUE BY WEDNESDAY 11:59PM]:**

Read Julie Miller’s article on Pamela Anderson and the recent Hulu series. What are your thoughts about this series as an example of ethical questions that come up with biographies? What are some details from the article that struck you most? (100 words)

## Writing Homework:\* Reading Responses 1-2

\*PLEASE NOTE: Writing Homework should be completed by SUNDAY PM each week, but will be submitted all together at the end of Week 3 in the Unit I Portfolio.

### Reading Response 1

Mark Griffin is a biographer whose subject, Rock Hudson, had a secret: he was gay. Take some time to reflect on the following questions in the context of Griffin's biography:

- What is the biographer's responsibility to truth?
- What does it mean for a biography to be truthful?
- When and why should a biographer disregard their subject's privacy?
- How does history impact a biographer's decisions about how to represent their subject?

### Reading Response 2

In her book *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, literary biographer Janet Malcolm reflects on the ethics of biographical writing, as she struggles to acquire archival materials about Sylvia Plath, due to Plath's husband Ted Hughes (and his sister) having legal control over the deceased poet's estate. Malcolm writes:

“Biography is the medium through which the remaining secrets of the famous dead are taken from them and dumped out in full view of the world. The biographer at work, indeed, is like the professional burglar, breaking into a house, rifling through certain drawers that he has good reason to think contain the jewelry and money, and triumphantly bearing his loot away. The voyeurism and busybodyism that impel writers and readers of biography alike are obscured by an apparatus of scholarship designed to give the enterprise an appearance of banklike blandness and solidity. The biographer is portrayed almost as a kind of benefactor. He is seen as sacrificing years of his life to his task, tirelessly sitting in archives and libraries and patiently conducting interviews with witnesses. There is no length he will not go to, and the more his book reflects his industry the more the reader believes that he is having an elevating literary experience, rather than simply listening to backstairs gossip and reading other people's mail. The transgressive nature of biography is rarely acknowledged, but it is the only explanation for biography's status as a popular genre. The reader's amazing tolerance (which he would extend to no novel written half as badly as most biographies) makes sense only when seen as a kind of collusion between him and the biographer in an excitingly forbidden undertaking: tiptoeing down the corridor together, to stand in front of the bedroom door and try to peep through the keyhole.”

What do you think Malcolm is saying about the genre of biography and the ethics of biographical research? What are some questions that come up for you in reading this passage? How does this relate to Leslie Kaufman's New York Times article about the quandary of biographers?

In your response, *be sure to cite from the texts* with quotations and analysis.

## Week Two: Genres of Biography

Key Terms: Genre, Context

Readings: Michael Schulman, [“On ‘Succession,’ Jeremy Strong Doesn’t Get the Joke”](#) (The New Yorker, December 13, 2021); On the Media, [“The Highs and Lows of the Celebrity Profile”](#) (NPR, December 17, 2021); Angela Watercutter, [“The Social Network Was More Right Than Anyone Realized”](#) (WIRED, February 5, 2019)

### Discussion Thread 2 [DUE BY WEDNESDAY 11:59PM]:

By the end of Unit I, you'll be proposing a particular subject you'd like to research and write about. The only two criteria for your subject are the following:

- The subject is no longer alive
- There are books, articles, and other archival materials your research can draw from

Take some time to brainstorm a list of possible biographical subjects, and share a list of 3-5 names. Please share some brief reflection on why you're interested in these subjects as well. (100 words or more)

### Writing Homework:\* Reading Responses 3-4

\*PLEASE NOTE: Writing Homework should be completed by SUNDAY PM each week, but will be submitted all together at the end of Week 3 in the Unit I Portfolio.

#### Reading Response 3 (200-300 words)

Read Michael Schulman's profile of Jeremy Strong and then listen to the On the Media episode in which host Brooke Gladstone discusses with Anne Helen Petersen the celebrity profile *as a genre*, and the New Yorker as a specific journalistic *context*. Then

consider the following questions about the controversy surrounding Schulman's profile:

- Was Schulman's profile unethical?
- How does the controversy about the profile have to do with different interpretations of the profile as a genre?
- What are some of the risks of biographical writing that this case study brings to light?

In your response, *be sure to cite from the texts* with quotations and analysis.

#### Reading Response 4 (200-300 words)

What is Angela Watercutter's argument about *The Social Network* and how it represents Mark Zuckerberg and the story of Facebook? What are some of the central points she makes about the biopic as a genre?

In your response, *be sure to cite from the text* with quotations and analysis.

### **Week Three: Research Proposal**

#### **Discussion Thread 3 [DUE BY WEDNESDAY 11:59PM]:**

Based on your brainstorming from last week, take some time to decide on who you'd like to research as your biographical subject. Then explain why you made this decision, and what you're most curious about as you begin your research. (100 words)

#### Research Proposal Questionnaire (400-500 words)

As you prepare your research proposal, take some time to reflect on the following questions and provide answers to each:

- 1) Who are you going to research?
- 2) Identify 3-4 facts about your subject that will be important aspects of your research.
- 3) What led you to decide on this research subject?
- 4) What are you most curious about?
- 5) Is there a portion of your subject's life that you'd like to focus on?
- 6) What do you need to learn about in terms of the historical context of your subject? Identify 3-4 areas of focus.

- 7) What questions or concerns do you have about how to approach your subject ethically? Are there issues you anticipate coming up in research material? How do you plan to put this biographical research into historical context?

Research Proposal (200-300 words)

Write a proposal for your biographical research project. Your proposal should do the following:

- Name a research subject
- Provide some historical context for that subject
- Explain what you'd like to learn about
- Describe what you'd like to write about as a biographer
- Identify 2-3 central questions that will guide your research

**Writing Homework:** Complete Unit I Portfolio [DUE BY SUNDAY 11:59PM]

### Unit I Portfolio

- Reading Responses 1-4 (200-300 words each)
- Research Proposal Questionnaire (400-500 words)
- Research Proposal (200-300 words)

## Unit II: Biography and Research Methods

Unit II Overview:

This portion of the class will integrate peer editing groups and library research into the weekly coursework. Throughout this unit, you'll be building a research project and working alongside other students. By the end of Week Seven, your research will be archived in an annotated bibliography, as well as a biographical timeline. Your Unit II Portfolio will also include the records of your peer-editing, along with a brief proposal about the design of your final research project.

### **Week Four: Library Research (I)**

**Discussion Thread 4 [DUE BY WEDNESDAY 11:59PM]: [Peer Editing 1]**

This week's discussion thread will take place within your peer editing group instead of the class at large. These groups will be focused on shared research topics or even subjects, and are designed to enhance your research experience and provide opportunities for collaboration. Please take this as an opportunity to work with and learn from others.

Here are details about peer editing groups:

- At the beginning of Unit II you'll be assigned to a Peer Editing Group.
- Within that group, everyone should coordinate to meet either in-person or remotely throughout Units II-III.
- Most of what you'll do is provide feedback on writing, which can be done on your own time.
- All you have to do this week is establish communication within your group.

**Writing Homework:** Begin Annotated Bibliography

### **Week Five: Library Research (II)**

**[Peer Editing 2]**

Check in with your peer editors about the annotated bibliography and the library research resources. Do you have any shared research topics? Are there sources you can share with each other? Determine a deadline to exchange biographical timelines next week.

**Writing Homework:** Complete Annotated Bibliography

Week Six: Constructing a Timeline

**[Peer Editing 3]**

**Writing Homework:** Complete Biographical Timeline

### **Week Seven: Project Proposals**

This week is focused on finalizing all materials for the Unit II Portfolio, including the final project proposal. This proposal should identify the genre in which you plan to write this project. Here are the *three biographical genres* to choose from:

- New Yorker Profile
- New York Times Obituary
- Biography Chapter

Based on which of these genres you've chosen, you'll briefly describe your plans for the final project. How will you integrate your research? What do you intend to focus on? What's the story you want to tell?

**Writing Homework:** Complete Unit II Portfolio [DUE BY SUNDAY 11:59PM]

### Unit II Portfolio

- Annotated Bibliography (at least 10 sources including: 2-3 scholarly texts, 1-2 journalistic sources, 1-2 media sources) (1,000-3,000 words, 100-300 words for each source)
- Peer Editing Work from Unit II
- Biographical Timeline (400-500 words)
- Final Project Proposal (200-300 words)

## Unit III: Writing Biography

### **Week Eight: Biography as Storytelling**

Key Terms: Storytelling, Narrative

The purpose of a biographical writing is to tell a life story, truthfully but not argumentatively. It's a much different genre than a thesis-driven academic essay, or opinion-based journalism. As we enter this last unit of the course, our first point of focus will be on storytelling, and how to translate your research into narrative-driven writing.

**Discussion Thread 5 [DUE BY WEDNESDAY 11:59PM]:**



What were the main discoveries of your research? What's your plan for the final project at this point? Briefly update us on your plans and reflections. (100 words)

**Writing Homework:** Biography Project Outline + Begin Rough Draft

### **Week Nine: Drafting**

**[Peer Editing 4]**

Exchange rough drafts of your final project and provide some provisional feedback. Use the following questions to ground your feedback:

- What's the story?
- What are some details that grab you?
- How is research being integrated? Are there quotes? Examples? Details?
- Where would you like more context?
- What's working for you in terms of narration, style, and research?

**Writing Homework:** Complete Rough Draft

### **Week Ten: More Drafting and Revision**

**[Peer Editing 5]**

Exchange complete drafts of your final project and provide further feedback. Follow up on the feedback you provided last week, along with the following questions:

- What should

**Writing Homework:** Complete Final Project [DUE DATE TBA]

Finals Week:

#### Unit III Portfolio

- Biography Project Outline (500-600 words)
- Peer Editing Work from Unit III

- Biography Project Draft (1,500-2,000 words)
- Biography Project Revision (2,000-2,500 words)