

Course Title: Travel Writing: Getting Paid to See the World

Course Code: CNF 08 W

Instructor: Justin Bergman

Course Description:

Please see course page for full description and additional details.

Required Reading:

Title: *Best American Travel Writing 2013*

Editor: Elizabeth Gilbert

ISBN-10: 0547808984

ISBN-13: 978-0547808987

<http://www.amazon.com/Best-American-Travel-Writing-2013/dp/0547808984>

Grading:

For those of you who are taking this course for a grade, the breakdown is as follows. Please note that you can change your grading status at any point before the final class meeting by contacting the Stanford Continuing Studies department.

Writing Exercises: 30%

Full-Length Feature: 30%

Pitches: 15%

Forum/Workshop Participation: 25%

Preliminary Syllabus in Brief:

Week 1: Introductions

Why do you love to travel? Where have you been recently, and where do you want to go? Before we begin writing travel stories for publication, we'll start with a 400-word, first-person essay about one moment from a recent trip you've taken in which you've felt a true sense of adventure, wonderment, or curiosity.

Week 2: Front of the book

Travel stories come in many different forms. There are the long magazine features that make us dream about faraway places, and there are the shorter, newsier, more focused stories that fill the "front of the book," or the first half of the travel magazine. Students will start with one of these—a 400-word story about a hotel, a restaurant, a new travel item on the market, an emerging travel trend, or some other attraction.

Week 3: “How-to” travel writing

Another form of travel writing is the “how-to” story, an instructional piece that informs a reader *how* to do something, rather than where to go. Examples include a story about how to bargain in the counterfeit clothing market in Shanghai, how to save money on a trip to Europe, or a review of three new backpacks on the market. Students will write a 500- to 1,000-word instructional piece.

Week 4: Story pitches, Part 1

Now that we’ve started travel writing, we focus on learning how to sell a good idea. Students will learn how to find the right publication and editor to target, and craft a 250-word story pitch for one of the first two stories they’ve written for the class.

Week 5: 36 Hours in... (Reporting)

One of the secrets to travel writing is the simple ability to find interesting things to do in a city and tell readers about them. Students will practice by crafting a city guide in the style of a “36 Hours” piece in *The New York Times* (or a similar format in another publication), providing 10 things to eat, see, or do in a city of their choice in one weekend. This week’s assignment will focus on reporting and how to spot the crucial details in a story and ask the right questions.

Week 6: 36 Hours in... (Writing)

For the second part of the 36 Hours assignment, students will focus on writing their weekend getaway guides. Special attention will be paid to writing colorfully and informatively while also keeping to the prescribed word count.

Week 7: Brainstorming ideas for the travel feature

The travel feature will be the final project for the class—a 1,000- to 2,000-word story about a destination of the students’ choice. We’ll start by brainstorming ideas, learning how to conduct interviews, and gathering preliminary research. If students choose to write about a location near them, this is the time to get in the car and go on a road trip!

Week 8: Features, Part 1

Students will begin crafting their travel feature, with a focus on writing a compelling lead, or first two to three paragraphs of the story. Students will submit the first 300 to 500 words of the story for peer review in the writing workshops.

Week 9: Features, Part 2

Students will complete their travel features.

Week 10: Editing and revision

Part of learning how to write is being able to revisit a piece you've written and revise. In the final week, students will take the comments they've received from the instructor and their fellow classmates and revise their final feature. Optional one-on-one conferences with the instructor can be scheduled for this week, as well.

Weekly Schedule:

This is a general schedule to follow for each week, but don't worry, it's not set in stone! If you have trouble getting an assignment completed by the due date, just let me know and post your work as soon as you can. Generally speaking, it is good to try to wrap up your work for each lesson by the weekend so you don't fall too far behind. Each new lesson will begin on a Monday and conclude on a Sunday.

MONDAY: Class week officially starts. On Monday morning (or Sunday night), I will send out an email introducing the week's lesson and your reading and writing assignment, as well as any suggestions I think might help as you start your work.

WEDNESDAY OR THURSDAY: Writing exercise due (though the earlier you post, the more time you'll have to receive feedback). I respond to them in the order in which they come in. You should respond to the members of your small feedback group by the end of the weekend, before the next week begins.

WEDNESDAY OR THURSDAY: I will hold a weekly video chat on whichever day is most convenient for the majority of the class. Here we can chat more informally about the week's assignment or travel writing in general. This is basically your opportunity to ask any questions you may have and get an immediate response from me. I'll also try to invite at least one special guest—a travel writer or editor—to join us in the chat for one week. You're not required to come to office hours; feel free to drop by when you can. Chat will begin in Week 2.

THROUGHOUT THE WEEK: Respond to posts, answer the questions in the Forum about the reading for the week, and read and comment on your classmates' pieces. I will be in the blackboard system every day, answering your questions and commenting on students' pieces, as well.

WEEKEND: Use the weekend to get a jumpstart on reading assignments for the following week. I won't be in the classroom over the weekend, but you're

welcome to start posting for the next week whenever you're ready. The classroom is always open!

Please note, as with a regular live class, after we begin a new week, the previous week's discussion concludes and we will not look back into those weeks.

Weekly Writing Exercises:

The bulk of the course will be spent writing. We'll start slowly, with a couple of short assignments so you can get the hang of it and learn how to write a story pitch to an editor. The bulk of the course will be spent developing a travel feature story, which can be anywhere from 1,000 to 2,000 words, depending on the type of publication you want to target. You'll begin with the idea stage—brainstorming possible stories and how they would work—and you'll then report your piece and write it in stages, with help and advice from your fellow students in the workshop. Don't worry—this course will not require travel! You can write about a trip you've taken recently, a trip you're planning to take sometime during the course, or even your own hometown. And hopefully, by the end, you'll be able to sell the piece to a publication. That's the main goal.

Word Limits:

This will depend on the assignment, obviously. But learning to write to length is an essential part of travel writing. I'd actually say it's one of the most important things! If you are handed a 250-word assignment, your editor really wants to see only 250 words, and it's your job to try to write to length without losing too much context, detail, or voice. It's difficult at first, but once you have some practice at it, you start to recognize a certain pattern that develops with shorter travel stories. You'll try your hand at two shorter pieces (about 250-500 words each) and then two longer pieces (800-2,000 words).

Mini-Workshops:

Becoming a good reader is an important part in your development as a writer. Learning how to identify the strengths and weaknesses in others' stories will help you recognize the strengths and weaknesses in your own. Starting in Week 1, we will form small groups in the online classroom system. The purpose of the groups is to foster an intensive community and to make sure all students receive peer feedback. Each week, you'll see four different group folders in Canvas. The first four students to turn in their assignments each week should post them in the "Group 1" folder; the second four students should post in the "Group 2" folder, etc. This will be your small group for the week—you'll be responsible only for reading and commenting on the students' pieces in your group. However, if you have the time and inclination, feel free to comment on stories in other groups, too. When we start working on the feature story at the end of the class, you'll stay in the same small group for the remainder of the course so you can see how your groupmates' pieces develop from start to finish and offer critiques and recommendations along the way.

Workshop Feedback:

When I'm critiquing someone's work, I like to read the piece twice—the first time, I read for pleasure and an overall sense of the work. The second time, I know enough to begin asking questions and paying attention to specific issues. This is where you can be really helpful to your classmates—you may see problems with structure that the writer doesn't see, for instance, or think of a better opener or closing line. The one thing to keep in mind is to always balance constructive criticism with positive reinforcement. Don't shy away from making suggestions. (Being too nice negates the point of the workshop.) But be kind and generous. Read another's work as you would like your own work to be read.

My Commentary:

I will be reading everything you write and offering brief comments at the end of your shorter pieces and more detailed line-editing notes for your feature stories. I'll post these responses in the Canvas system where everyone can read them. This is because, in a live course, I'd be making many of the comments during class discussions so that everyone benefited from them. Although we aren't sharing the same physical space, you should think of the online and the discussion threads as a place to interact with each other. After posting your critique, you may read someone else's and find yourself wanting to elaborate on his or her comments or offering a different perspective. I will also read your comments to one another and chime in when I have something to add.

My Online Presence:

I'll be online and responding to new posts in the classroom five days per week. I also check my email several times a day, and respond as promptly as I can. The one thing to keep in mind is that I live in Shanghai, China, and there's a 16-hour time difference with the West Coast, so don't be surprised if my messages come back to you in the middle of the night! The beauty of an online class is that we can all do our work when our schedules permit; we don't have to be working simultaneously. So log on when it's convenient for you, morning or night, weekday or weekend. Just keep in mind that at the end of the week, on Sunday night, we move into a new week in the forum. If you are late with an assignment and you want to receive feedback, don't post it in the expired week or you run the risk of no one seeing it. Post it in the new week in the folder entitled Late Work.)

A Final Important Note:

Although many students take online courses with the absolute best intentions

of doing every last assignment, "real life"—family, illness, professional deadlines—often has a way of making that impossible. Sometimes, the frustration this causes prompts students to drop out of the class. Hold on! If you have to skip a couple exercises, this is also OK. As long as you're getting most of the work done and commenting on your classmates' submissions, you'll be fine. Please don't hesitate to get in touch if you have any concerns about your standing. If you foresee some bumps in the road, let me know. We'll work together to find the best possible solution for you.

This is your class. I'm the guide, yes, but the quality of our discussions will depend upon your engagement, insightfulness, and good humor. This course will be as good as you give. So, please participate fully and generously in discussions. Read your classmates' work with a keen eye and a sense of possibility. And please, let me know if there's anything I can do to make this a better experience for you. If there's some finer point of freelancing or travel writing that you want to discuss, let me know. If there's an assignment that you think would work in this class, tell me. This is your class.

One more note: Writing workshops are built on trust. I think this is even truer in online workshops where we're not all sitting together in the same room. To build this trust, it's important that we all agree that the work you present here stays within the workshop. If you love someone's piece and want to share it with your husband/wife/best friend, ask the writer first. Chances are, she (or he) will be thrilled and give you the go ahead. But please, first get permission.