

VIRAL JOURNALISM

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Course Description

Most writing for periodicals is ephemeral, almost by definition. And yet, since the dawn of journalism, there have always been articles that emerge from the mass to become classics. **This course examines those articles** that have made this jump to durable social memory in the age of the Internet, becoming widely-shared beyond the typical readership of their source publications. We will use these articles as springboards to analytical questions about the craft of writing, such as:

- What qualities, both regarding the subject matter and aside from it, lend this article its power and popularity?
- What stylistic and rhetorical moves are responsible for the article's overall character?
- How can we as writers learn from our analysis of these texts?

This is a **three-month online course for 90 minutes**, meeting **once a week** offering complete coverage of the material listed in this document.



Course Content

Kathryn Schulz, "The Really Big One," The New Yorker

What choices does Schulz make about how she presents her topics and facts?

- What order does she put them in?
- When does she choose to use a metaphor or example rather than just plunging into the facts she's collected in her research?
- When does she use narrative instead of explanation, and what is her goal when she does that?

Pete Wells, "As Not Seen on TV," The New York Times

While reading, note down anything that feels like a pattern or a literary device, and contemplate its effect on you as a reader.

We'll be identifying these patterns by their formal names, and discussing their purposes within the context of rhetoric.

Caity Weaver, "What Is Glitter?" The New York Times

This article has two main effects on us as readers, both of which tend to be highly successful in internet writing: humor and suspense.

- Identify at least three sentences involving humor and at least two that provoke suspense, and elaborate on how Weaver creates those effects.

John Colapinto, "The Interpreter," The New Yorker

- How has your own experience of thinking/being shaped by language (your own or others)?
- Do you agree with Dan Everett's perspectives (in part or overall)?

Alex Tizon, "My Family's Slave," The Atlantic

This article skillfully navigates two qualities that often seem irreconcilably at odds: outrage and sympathy. Provoking outrage in the reader is a reliable way to arrest the reader's attention, especially on the internet, but doing so successfully can backfire, leading to the widespread condemnation known as "canceling."

Portraying one's self as sympathetic is important for many texts that adopt a memoir format, as this one does, but it can ring hollow if it seems too deliberate.

- In this article, how does the author want readers to think about him?
- What kind of image of himself is he trying to portray? Is he successful?

Gene Weingarten, "Pearls Before Breakfast," The Washington Post

- What are Weingarten's assumptions about people?
- Is he aware of them?
- How do you think they shape his opinions, based on his reporting?

Unrelatedly: This is the oldest of our selections so far, belonging to the first wave of texts written in view of being published primarily on the Internet, print being secondary.

As a result, it shows some style moves that are distinctly Internet-inflected:

- Can you find some of these?
- Do you think they harm or help the article's overall style?

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