

Questions and Answers: Writing About Other People

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Introduction

It has taken six years, but I have finally embraced the role of high school English teacher. Not that I didn't enjoy teaching or wasn't "into" it before. But I would always find myself saying, perhaps with some reservation, that I "teach English," putting the act of teaching before the subject itself, as though I were merely a warm body in a classroom. As if I'd one day find myself teaching something else that wasn't English, something I was even less qualified to teach. Like chemical engineering, or driver's ed, or kindergarten.

One of these areas I'd like to strengthen taps into my pre-teaching days as a writer and editor. Prior to becoming a teacher in 2011, I spent six years working for various publications, both in print and online, writing and rewriting, editing and tweaking, waiting for approval, assignments, paychecks. (Five of those years were spent as the editor of a local arts-and-entertainment publication, where I also arranged photo shoots and artwork, proof-read pages, and yayed 'n' nayed story pitches from hungry freelancers.) One of my signature pieces was the Q&A, short for question-and-answer, in which I'd interview musicians, writers, artists, radio hosts, and local politicians, then boil down their responses into digestible copy. It was a great way to make a living, I'll admit, though no easy task. (You try transcribing an hour-long interview with a caffeinated Henry Rollins.)

As my journalism career led to a teaching career—the journalism industry had taken countless major hits, with newspapers and magazines folding at an alarming rate—I all but wrote off (no pun intended) the need to teach journalism to my students. Blasphemy, I know, but there was always so much else to do: novels, plays, argument writing, research essays, SAT prep, etc., etc. It wasn't that journalism didn't matter—one could argue, in this age of social-media reporting and "fake" news, journalism matters now more than ever. It was more of an operator error on my part. As an English teacher, I didn't see the connection between the methods I learned as a journalist and the work that could be done in the classroom.

My proposed unit is a response to short-sightedness. I want my students to become critical thinkers—to think for themselves, to feel confident about the choices they make as writers, to reflect on the work they've done. One of the ways I see this happening is through the problem-solving process that is journalism, which is full of problems to solve: who to interview; how to get someone to talk; how to come up with questions in advance as well as in the moment; what to keep; what to cut. Students will have the

opportunity to do tackle these questions and others with this project by completing the following tasks: finding an older person to interview (someone who is at least 18 years old; cannot be someone still in high school); crafting questions based on the theme of “coming of age”; and editing the piece so that it includes both a profile-style introduction (three paragraphs and at least 250 words) and a Q&A portion of no less than 10 questions.

The “coming of age” theme can be best explained this way: in 9th grade, my students are exposed to a variety of texts (short stories, essays, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Romeo + Juliet*) that explore the theme of “coming of age.” As adults, we know what this means—coming of age is the transformation from childhood to adulthood. But students struggle with this concept, perhaps because they are experiencing adolescence in real time, rather than reflecting on it after the fact. To reinforce this important idea, students will center their interview questions on the theme of coming age, asking their subjects, “When was the first time you felt like an adult?”

Background

I teach English at Hodgson Vo-Tech High School (HVT), one of four vocational-technical high schools in New Castle County. Located in Newark, Delaware, just a few miles south of the University of Delaware, Hodgson Vo-Tech offers a wide selection of career paths tied to hands-on training and work experience. In order to graduate, students must complete the related coursework for their career area as well as perform satisfactorily in the traditional academic areas: science, social studies, math, and English. While many graduating seniors forgo college in lieu of their chosen career paths or other job opportunities, increasing numbers of students are pursuing post-secondary education.

As I have the last several years, this school year I will again be teaching ELA in grades 9 (which I plan to focus on for this unit) and 11, with class sizes typically around 25 students. This will be my sixth year at HVT and my seventh year overall as a classroom teacher. My experience thus far teaching English at HVT has proved rewarding and successful, but not without its challenges. Vo-tech students enjoy doing things—their career areas provide them with constant opportunity to move, explore, and shape the material they learn—but having to sit, read, write, and think for extended periods fatigues even the most inspired minds. Creating a kind of student “buy-in” for this unit will be key—our sample Q&As with relatable sports and entertainment figures are great place to start—as will breaking the project into pieces so that students can get the most out of it. This unit is designed for students in ELA 1, or grade 9.

Content Knowledge

I see my unit as an opportunity to practice two different yet similar forms of journalism: the Q&A and the profile.

When I was an editor, I loved running Q&As. They were both fun to read and easy to edit, due to the informal, conversational nature in which they happened. Profiles, on the other hand, gave writers the chance to “stretch out” and flex their prose. Like a garden, they took up more space, but they were beautiful to look at. They could also be problematic—here I speak as both a writer and an editor—because the composition process required a kind of organization and discipline not all writers possess.

Defining the Terms

To start, it will be helpful to define the terms we’ll be working with: Q&A and profile. I’ve already explained what Q&A is short for—question and answer—but author Julia Goldberg offers a more instructive take:

For Q&A-style interviews, the emphasis is on trying to construct a print version of a series of questions and answers to an edited piece that reads more like an organic conversation. The print version of an interview is not a raw transcript but a construction, and much of the work takes place in the editing process: eliminating redundant exchanges and looking for the moments that stand out in the larger conversation.¹

I like that word, “construction.” I also like the term “organic conversation.” It’s a paradox, however; how does one create something that’s supposed to happen naturally? Goldberg suggests being prepared for an interview by doing some preliminary research and having questions ready. But she also warns that “questions can sometimes get in the way of actually finding the story.”² In other words, we can miss opportunities for great, unexpected moments when we focus on trying to make them happen. Here, Goldberg cites the example of our expert Mike Sager, who “tries to simply be there and let the subject lead the conversation.”³

Model Q&A

Sager would know. In 1998, Sager interviewed actor Rod Steiger for *Esquire* magazine. Instead of taking his notes and writing a fawning profile of an elder statesman, Sager pulled out Steiger’s best soundbites and advice—to his credit, Steiger came to the interview with his own notes—and crafted a piece using just quotes. “What I’ve Learned” caught on and has remained a staple in the publication ever since.⁴ What works so well about “What I’ve Learned” is how it moves, with random marvel, all over the spectrum—from serious to humorous and mundane in between. In this way, it’s a mirror of life itself: the ups, the downs, the just-rights. Here’s veteran rocker Tom Petty, from 2006, on having a successful career: “Do something you really like, and hopefully it pays the rent.”⁵ Here he is again, on the state of education: “[Kids] get so much homework. Remember the days when we put a belt around our two books and carried them home?”

Now they're dragging a suitcase."⁶ And, not to be outdone, on self-confidence: "I don't think I've learned anything that I didn't already know. I just didn't recognize it at first."⁷

Petty's print-ready soundbites could have been spoken verbatim—the man has written some of FM radio's catchiest and most durable songs, after all. Or Sager could have delicately edited them, a process Goldberg calls cleaning up. "Most of us do not speak with perfect grammar or even in complete sentences," she writes.⁸ "So do you fix people's quotes so that they make sense?"⁹ Yes, but "these decisions should be made thoughtfully and consistently," Goldberg writes.¹⁰ "I draw the line here: Never add to quoted material without an editorial note. Modify or reduce quoted material to avoid redundancy, confusion, or tedium."¹¹

No doubt Sager was letting his subjects, Tom Petty included, lead the conversation in these interviews. Sager's advice also comes in handy for the more traditional kind of profile, which involves writing about a specific person and painting a kind of picture of who this person is, often by talking to that person directly. Goldberg says the interview process of profile writing "can take hours in order to be able to write an in-depth story that captures and characterizes the person about whom one is writing."¹²

I like that word, "characterizes." It implies a sense of honors and flaws, success and failure. It's odd, perhaps, to think of the real people we're writing about as characters in our stories, especially if those people are our family members or close family friends. But it makes sense when we think about what great storytelling is. We care about the characters in the stories we love. We want to spend time with them and get to know them better; we want to see their honors and flaws, know their successes and failures.

Model Profile #1

A perfect example of this aesthetic is comedian and actor Steve Martin's *New Yorker* essay "The Death of My Father." In it, Steve portrays his dad, Glenn, as both hero and villain, while admitting his own flaws as a son. Their strained relationship is hinted at in the essay's opening lines ("In his death, my father, Glenn Vernon Martin, did something he could not do in life. He brought our family together."¹³) and fleshed out through searing anecdotes about awkward father-son catches and Glenn's "critical" attitude toward Steve's early show-business career, which included *Saturday Night Live*. (This could very well be due to jealousy; Glenn yearned for his own success in showbiz before turning to a career in real estate.) Spurred by a friend's advice to "work out" any issues he has with his parents before it's too late, Steve begins taking his mother and father to lunch once a week. Things are still awkward—Steve has to "goad them into talking"—but the effort slowly thaws whatever emotional ice has built up over the years; at one point, Glenn and Steve exchange a softly spoken "I love you."¹⁴ As Glenn becomes older and death becomes inevitable, more feelings arrive: he wishes to cry "for all the love I received and couldn't return." Just days from dying, Glenn's life becomes clear, and

Steve sees his father as a person, not a character in his life: “It was as though an early misstep had kept us forever out of stride. Now, two days from his death, our pace was aligning and we were able to speak.”¹⁵ Because Glenn’s death isn’t a surprise—it’s revealed in the essay’s title—we look for closure and lessons rather than plot detail. “My father’s death has a thousand endings,” Martin writes.¹⁶ “I continue to absorb its messages and meanings. He stripped death of its spooky morbidity and made it tangible and passionate. He prepared me in some way for my own death.”¹⁷

Model Profile #2

A great profile doesn’t just inform us about a person’s life, or the life of the person writing it. It informs us about our own lives: what we have, what’s important to us, how we’d feel if we lost it. In Andrew Corsello’s *GQ* piece “The Wronged Man,” a National Magazine Award finalist for feature writing in 2004, Corsello details the imprisonment and eventual release of Calvin Willis, a Louisiana man accused of a rape he didn’t commit. Willis spent 22 years in prison until DNA evidence led to his freedom in 2003. It is an uncomfortable piece of writing. No one should have to suffer the way Calvin has, and even with its bittersweet ending, “The Wronged Man” rings with feelings of hurt and loss. Corsello walks us through the stages of Calvin’s life pre-, mid-, and post-prison life with such sensitivity, such fly-on-the-wall observation, it brings to mind Atticus Finch talking to Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: “You never really understand a person until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.” Calvin is 5’8”, nicknamed “Big Hands,” and “knows how to dance fast and dance slow, how to tell a story, how to make his friends feel they’re at the center of things.”¹⁸ Calvin is personable and confident, “has always enjoyed being Calvin.”¹⁹ The day before Calvin is arrested on rape charges, he quits his job as a sanitation worker because he “doesn’t want his kids having to say their daddy rides the back of a garbage truck.”²⁰ Calvin has decided to become a long-haul driver; his written exam takes place the day of his arrest. He sings and talks out loud to Jesus. He loves his pregnant wife, Debbie, and wants to be a better father to the child they already have together. He dresses well and sports a \$65 haircut. He is not perfect, but he is trying to change, and he is certainly not guilty of the awful crime with which he’s been charged.

We know all these things not because Calvin tells us. Or because the writer, Andrew Corsello, tells us. Rather, Corsello lets the story tell itself. He shows us. He becomes embedded in Calvin’s struggle to get free and reunite with Debbie, who eventually moves on and has a child with another man. And Calvin’s struggle—those 22 years in prison—don’t just include Calvin. They include Debbie and her new husband; his daughter, Kesha, just 2 years old at the time of Calvin’s arrest but now married; Calvin’s son, Calvin Jr., born while Calvin awaited his trial, now with a child of his own; his mother, Narlvil Newton, 85 years old when Calvin is finally released; and a woman named Janet Gregory, who fights for Calvin’s freedom after reading his file while working as a paralegal. Janet has her own struggles in the form of abusive relationships with men, and she finds a

kindred spirit in Calvin's mistreatment by the justice system.

Corsello is not personally there to capture the thoughts and feelings of these men and women in the moments they happen. But this is also not the kind of writing one can do through extensive phone conversations or face-to-face interviews. We can assume Corsello has years—decades, even—of reporting experience that finds a powerful voice once married to the conventions of effective storytelling and narrative structure. It feels right to call what Corsello has done here cinematic. Calvin's story would make a great movie if it weren't so painfully true. (In fact, it was turned into a Lifetime Movie Network film in 2010.) We know these people after reading "The Wronged Man"; they are not simply characters in a magazine article.

This also creates a fine line. In presenting Calvin as a victim of unfortunate circumstance—part of which, Corsello later states plainly, has to do with Calvin being "black and poor"—Corsello perhaps takes too many liberties with the details of Calvin's life. These observations range from presumptuous to borderline melodramatic. On the morning of Calvin's arrest, for example, Corsello describes Calvin waking up "with a start."²¹ Calvin "feels odd," Corsello writes.²² "Not himself. He feels *larger* than himself, as if his spirit has grown beyond the boundaries of his body."²³ Corsello obviously wasn't there for this. So did Calvin articulate these feelings to Corsello years later, in an interview, or did Corsello project them after he spoke with Calvin or read through court documents?

The journalist in me knows the answer: it doesn't really matter. In telling a good story—especially a good story that's also an important story, like a man wrongfully imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit—we expect the author to bring a subject to life, to make us feel like we were there. The facts still remain, even if they're painted in narrative color.

Model Profile #3

"Death Is Real," on the other hand, strips away narrative color in favor of raw, straight-ahead reporting. Published earlier this year on the music website Pitchfork, "Death Is Real" is Jayson Greene's profile of musician Phil Elverum in the wake of his wife Genevieve's death from cancer. The story takes its title from a song on Elverum's latest album *A Crow Looked at Me*, recorded under the name Mount Eerie in the months following Genevieve's death. (Elverum is a busy artist who has recorded 13 various albums and projects under different names, including the Microphones. In 2001, the Microphones' *The Glow, Pt. 2* received Pitchfork's Album of the Year honor; *A Crow Looked at Me* received a rare 9.0/10 review shortly after its release this past March.)

In profiling Elverum, Greene clearly had his work cut out for him. The piece serves two important yet conflicting purposes. The first is to discuss Elverum's life as both a

widow and a newly single father (he and Genevieve had a daughter together who is 2 years old at the time of the story). The second purpose is to discuss Elverum's latest Mount Eerie album, itself a response to Genevieve's death. While these two areas are intrinsically related—it's impossible to see where one ends and the other begins—they present some delicate challenges for the writer.

Greene appears to know this well beforehand. He arrives to the assignment as a fan of Elverum's music and as a journalist with a job to do, but also with the kind of unflinching nerve Elverum himself seems to have developed now that he's responsible for raising his daughter alone. It's almost as if Greene is steeling himself to mirror the strength Elverum musters every day now, given these new circumstances. "I am scouring Phil Elverum's stove," Green begins the piece, sponge in hand.²⁴ "It needs it."²⁵ Greene is sensitive to this particular assignment, and quickly finds himself part of the story. "Taking care of a toddler, [Elverum] needs all the help he can get," Green writes.²⁶ "I might be a journalist, but I am also a parent and an extra pair of hands. So I clean the stove."²⁷

Greene rides this line of dual purpose throughout the profile. He takes an objective, informed view of *A Crow Looked at Me* as a work of art: "The music is low and murmuring. His voice is hushed and conversational. The theme of impermanence can still be felt."²⁸ He also addresses the elephant in the room: Genevieve's death and the impact it's left on Phil and their family. Greene relays this premise matter-of-factly:

Elverum has invited me to spend the day with him in the house where Geneviève died, where he's raising his daughter... I am, presumably, going to ask him a series of deeply personal questions about a tragedy that is still unfolding around him.²⁹

Greene punctuates the profile with a kind of clinical syntax, short, subject-first sentences that leave out any trace of pity. Perhaps Greene is hoping to avoid accusations of dramatizing a very real situation. At one point, Elverum admits not knowing where to draw the line between personal and professional: "Even just having you here, upstairs, showing you Geneviève's journals: Is *that* over a line?" he asks Greene.³⁰ But some of the piece's most tender moments come when Greene allows himself to be in it. He keeps an eye on Elverum's daughter, helps make dinner, cleans up after the meal is over. They sit down to talk, and Greene notes how Elverum "has that nimbus of pleasant exhaustion around him, one I recognize well from a day spent caring for a toddler."³¹ Hours pass; Greene misses his shuttle home. He ends up staying the night. Before falling asleep, he has been warned that Elverum's daughter wakes up early, often by screaming in Elverum's face. These details—small, almost not worth mentioning—are what matter most now.

Teaching Strategies

While the profiles above have informed much of what I need to know about teaching the principles of journalism, it is the “What I’ve Learned”-style Q&A where I’d like my students to focus their efforts.

The successful implementation of my unit would look like this: students will interview a subject—a parent, grandparent, brother or sister, aunt, uncle, or even a neighbor or family friend—and write both a Q&A and a profile from the material they gather. We will analyze examples of effective Q&As and profiles before and during our process (see below), so that students may have a model for their own work.

The requirements here are that: 1) the chosen subject must be someone who’s older (18 years old and out of high school); and 2) the focus of the piece is to answer the question, “When was the first time you felt like an adult?”

In my years as a writer, two practices stand apart for their usefulness in the field of journalism, and I join them here for the purpose of my unit. The first was an assignment I had in the one and only journalism class I took at the University of Delaware, where we were asked to interview an elderly person and write about what we learned. I interviewed a friend of the family who, during his time in the navy, witnessed some of the hydrogen-bomb testing that would lead to the end of WWII. The experience taught me what an incredible resource older generations are—they have first-hand knowledge that simply can’t be matched by micro-second Google searches. The second practice comes from a conversation I was fortunate to have with the aforementioned Mike Sager, an *Esquire* writer-at-large whose masterful piece on former football great Todd Marinovich won him a National Magazine Award for profile writing in 2010. While visiting the UD campus in 2007, Sager and I had dinner and discussed how to get ahead in the non-lucrative world of magazine journalism. I was doing an awful lot of music writing, and while there was no shortage of music to write about, there definitely seemed to be a shortage of publications willing to pay for it. Sager told me, and I quote from memory: “Stop writing about music. Music doesn’t matter. Write about people. Stories about people matter.”

Both the Q&A and profile approaches allow the student-writer to think deeply about his or her subject while practicing methods of journalism. Specifically, I’d like them to think about the kinds of questions they should ask of their subjects—and later, which answers they can discard or don’t fit into the finished product—using a modified framework seminar leader Prof. Joe Harris discusses in his book, *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts*. When students are asked to read and summarize a text, Harris offers, they tend to think of the text as “something fixed or static,” rather than “ways of talking about a subject.”³² Harris proposes that readers ask themselves what the writer’s “project” is. “A project is something that a writer is working on,” Harris states, “and that a text can only imperfectly realize.”³³ This is how journalists think. They ask questions whose answers hopefully lead to more questions. They are intrigued by what they find. They come to conclusions, realizing that a person’s story isn’t complete. If students can

approach their work in the same manner, they might unlock the kind of critical thinking that could benefit them academically and professionally for years to come.

I plan to tackle these challenges in steps, breaking the project into smaller, more manageable pieces. Students will start by interviewing each other and practicing the journalistic techniques we study in class: preparing for the interview by crafting questions ahead of time; focusing on a particular set or series of questions in order to find a “hook”; and understanding the benefits and disadvantages of both Q&A and profile writing. They will then move onto the assignment of interviewing an older person in their lives and transcribing the results into both a 10-question Q&A and a 250-word, three-paragraph profile.

Samples for the Classroom

The model Q&A and profiles above have been helpful in thinking about journalism from a critical point of view. For a ninth-grade classroom, however, they may not work—the themes are too mature; the lengths of the pieces run too long; the quality of work is daunting. They are not introductory texts. It would be like teaching a group of first-graders how to play basketball by showing them highlight videos of Michael Jordan—inspiring, for sure, but hardly within reach.

To that end, there are several other pieces I’d like to work into these classroom discussions, as well as a set of rules that can help us think about our approach.

The first of these pieces is a profile-Q&A hybrid with the popular singer-songwriter Lana Del Rey, titled “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness,” by Pitchfork’s Alex Frank. This piece is the model for what my students will do in this unit: combining the profile and Q&A techniques into a single piece. Besides the buy-in this piece will get from my student, it is ideal to use as a teaching strategy for several reasons.

The first is that it asks a question in the subhed (journalism short-hand for the sub-heading of a story): “On the eve of her fourth album, the pagan pop star sounds more content than ever. How did she get there?” We now have a purpose to the interview, a question we want answered.

The second thing the LDR profile/Q&A does well is give us lots of detail. Del Rey is a “studio junkie” whose recording space boasts a “scratched-up leather club chair with a Tammy Wynette album cover facing it.”³⁴ She “binge watches” *The Bachelor*. She records her interviews with her iPhone in case she’s misquoted. Her birth name is Elizabeth Grant; friends call her Lana but her parents do not.

The third thing the Del Rey interview does is gives us two ways of reading it. The first is a short profile that sets up the Q&A, heavy on detail and embedded-reporter narrative.

(Frank begins the piece by describing how surprised he is that Del Rey is early for their interview, because “famous artists are notoriously late.”³⁵) The second part of the interview is the Q&A, arguably the main event, which is full of charming, occasionally snarky soundbites. (For our purposes in the classroom, I have edited the Q&A portion of the interview for length and language.) Here, Frank does the opposite of what he does in the beginning: instead of inserting himself into the story he fades away, letting Del Rey do all the talking.

A probing title, eye-catching details, readability: three ideas I’d like my students to build into their own writing.

Another piece I think my students would find useful is Morgan Freeman’s “What I’ve Learned” *Esquire* interview with Emily Zemler from 2016. Freeman’s voice has become something of a narrator to us all, the sound we hear in our heads when important things happen. I’m not sure high school students always feel that way, but they tend to be very familiar with this work: *Glory* and *Invictus* (history-class movie staples); *The Dark Knight*; the *Dolphin Tale* and *Now You See Me* series. Freeman’s advice in “What I’ve Learned”—no doubt edited for length and/or clarity but still with his voice intact—carries a similar cross-generational sensibility: “When I was around 21, someone told me, ‘Don’t look for trouble,’” he tells Zemler.³⁶ “I try to follow that. But trouble is the easiest thing in the world to find.”³⁷ Who in 9th grade wouldn’t be able to relate to that? “One of the things I say to young people, particularly my kids, is: ‘You get what you want,’” he goes on.³⁸ “I’m making distinction between ‘want’ and ‘would like to have.’ What you want is what you’re going to put on the refrigerator door.”³⁹ Freeman’s ideas are simple, but they carry important weight. They provide lessons for life, born out of a life that’s had its lessons. “I always thought that career comes first. Family is a support mechanism. It doesn’t work the other way around,” he observes.⁴⁰ This is what students should aim to pull from their interviews with their own elder subjects: simple, important ideas that high school readers can absorb and remember.

Freeman’s quotes feel natural and comfortable, as if they just fell from his brain to his mouth during a stimulating conversation one day. Perhaps they did. But it’s helpful to think of how these ideas came to him—what probed him to think about them before he articulated them. Open-ended questions provide an answer. SpringBoard defines open-ended questions as those that “cannot be answered with a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no.’”⁴¹ In asking open-ended questions, interviewers tap into bigger, broader issues or themes; in Freeman’s case, things like family, career, and staying out of trouble. Students will be pressed to ask open questions, rather than “closed” questions, to have an effective interview with their subjects.

During my time as a journalist, I can’t say I ever followed a hard set of rules that made my writing life easier. I had habits and tendencies, but there was never much time to reflect on them; another deadline always loomed. But as a teacher, I find rules for reading

and writing imperative. I take discipline seriously—both in terms of classroom behavior and learning content. That said, here is a set of rules, some of them culled directly from the lessons of Goldberg and Sager, I'd like my students to follow when they set out to interview their subjects.

Classroom Activities

The successful implementation of this unit consists of three parts that make up four school days' worth of lessons: preparing for the interview (two lessons), conducting the interview (outside of class), and writing and editing the piece (in class; two lessons).

Preparing for the Interview

Lesson essential questions for these two lessons:

- 1) What is journalism, and why is it important?
- 2) How do writers detail their subjects in order to connect with readers?

In the preparation stage, students learn what journalism is, why it's important, and how it's done. They also practice interviewing each other and select the person they'll interview for their submitted piece.

Dictionary.com defines journalism as “the occupation of reporting, writing, editing, photographing, or broadcasting news or of conducting any news organization as a business.” We'll only be doing those first three things—reporting, writing, and editing—so our definition will be truncated to read: “the work of interviewing subjects, writing about events, and editing that work.”

We then move into seeing what journalism looks like. For our purposes, this means reading a series of pieces, the first of which is Alex Frank's profile of Lana Del Rey. Students will first read the piece independently, paying special attention to the Q&A portion. Then, they will rate Frank's questions using a 3-2-1 scale:

- 3 = “I learned a lot from this question”
- 2 = “I learned something but wanted to learn more”
- 1 = “I did not learn very much from this question”

Next, they will be paired up (for convenience, they will use desk partners, where students work with the person sitting next to them) and compare their lists of questions, followed by a brief share-aloud of their findings.

Finally, and most important, students will select three of the interview's 15 questions—questions that scored a one or two on the scale—and rewrite them so that they are closer to “threes”—questions from which they learned a lot by reading. The trick here

is to look at the response to the question as much as the question itself. For example, consider the following exchange:

Pitchfork: Is there a storyline to the album?
LDR: Yeah.

Pitchfork: What's the story?
LDR: You have to figure it out.

To his credit, Frank certainly seems to be trying here, and Del Rey prefers to remain elusive. But the line of inquiry simply drops after this question, and it could have been interesting had it been pushed further. A reworking of the second question might move it from a one on the scale (“I did not learn very much from this question”) to a three (“I learned a lot from this question”):

Pitchfork: Is there a storyline to the album?
LDR: Yeah.

Pitchfork: What's the story?
LDR: You have to figure it out.

Pitchfork: If we wanted to figure it out, what song should we go to first?

An extension activity for this part of the lesson will be available on Schoology, the online education portal we use at Hodgson. This activity consists of *New York Times* Q&A interviews with hip-hop producer DJ Khaled and radio personality Angie Martinez. For each interview, students will select 3 question-and-answer responses they feel are threes and explain why.

The second main activity in this lesson centers on Morgan Freeman’s “What I’ve Learned” interview. Similar to the LDR profile, students will do several things with this piece of writing. First, they will read the interview silently. Then, they will each come up with a list of potential questions Freeman may have been asked by *Esquire* writer Emily Zemler. This is a creative exercise with no “right” or “wrong” answers; since we weren’t there and don’t have access to Zemler’s transcript or notes, it’s impossible to know for sure what prompted Freeman’s answers. Finally, students will use their desk partners to compare their lists of questions and determine a “master list”—the best questions. This activity moves students closer to becoming journalists by helping them envision what the work actually looks like.

The lesson concludes with students practicing the art of interviewing by—you guessed it—interviewing each other. Using their same desk partners, students will come up with a list of five questions. Since we are working with ninth graders, the list of questions

should be centered on the topic of being a freshman at Hodgson: *Why did you come to Hodgson? What shops (career areas) are you interested in? What sports are you playing or plan to play? What do you want to do after graduation?* Students will take turns asking each other questions and jotting down the answers to conclude the lesson.

Now that students understand what journalism is and what it looks like, they are ready for the second lesson. In this lesson, we tackle the essential question: Why is journalism important? In other words, why should someone care about what we write?

Obviously, journalism is important for lots of reasons: it offers information about, and awareness of, issues both locally and around the world; it provides a system of checks and balances on our government and public officials; it is entertainment to be enjoyed; it is an art form to be appreciated. For the kind of work we'll be doing in this unit, journalism will be a gateway to having thoughtful conversations. Julia Goldberg explored this idea during workshops where she had students ask each other questions they had previously never discussed. "In a classroom in Mexico City," she writes, "I saw two students, both in tears, toward the end of the exercise. When I asked them what was wrong, they told me they had learned things about each other that, despite a long friendship, they hadn't known."⁴²

This observation leads into the second day's activity: selecting a subject to interview and crafting a list of questions for the interview. Students may choose any adult they know, as long as he or she meets the following requirements: this person: 1) must be at least 18 years or older; and 2) cannot be someone still in high school. Students should have at least two people in mind, in case one is not immediately available.

Inevitably, students get stuck here. Examples of interview subjects that might make good interview subjects include older brothers and sisters who no longer live at home; aunts, uncles, or grandparents; or neighbors. While parents certainly meet the requirements of the assignment, students will be encouraged to "think outside the box" (or, in this case, outside their home). However, as 9th graders have limited means of transportation, parents and those close to home will be allowed.

We then move on to preparing for the interview itself. When crafting their lists of questions, students must be aware of the difference between "open" and "closed" questions. As explained earlier, open-ended questions tap into bigger ideas and allow interview subjects to "open up" (whereas "closed" questions keep subjects "closed off"). Julia Goldberg's chart (found in Additional Resources) will be helpful here as a mini-lesson in open vs. closed questions.

A final activity in this lesson is the introduction of the "How to Conduct a Successful Interview" rules, found in Additional Resources. Incorporating tips from Julia Goldberg

and Mike Sager, as well as my own experiences as a journalist, the rules make for a short set of guidelines students should be aware of prior to interviewing their subjects.

Conducting the Interview

The interview itself is a homework assignment to be done outside of class. Students are expected to initiate contact with their chosen subject, designate a date and time for the interview, and conduct the interview in a professional manner. They will be reminded to use and review their “How to Conduct a Successful Interview” rules handout prior to the interview in order to maximize their time with their subjects and to produce the best results.

Students may record the interview any number of ways. The preferred method will most likely be using their phones, as this will give them something they can go back to and transcribe for accuracy. iPads and traditional tape recorders also work. Students will also be encouraged to take notes during the interview, as a back-up measure in case technology fails (as a former journalist, I can testify that this happens more than we plan for).

Writing and Editing the Piece

Lesson essential questions for these lessons:

- 1) *How do writers detail their subjects in order to connect with readers?*
- 2) *How can we be effective journalists?*

With lessons in mind and notes in hand, students are now ready to write and edit their piece. The first step will be to transcribe the notes from the interview. This is a simple yet time-consuming process, and to move things along, students will be prompted to focus on typing out the questions and answers in full. Although the assignment calls for 10 responses in the Q&A portion, students should put everything down for now. Once the full transcript is in view, we will focus on selecting the 10 responses that flow like a natural conversation. Remembering that the point of the finished piece is to highlight when the interview subject first felt like an adult, students will work in pairs to help find those responses in each other’s work, selecting three to five question-and-answer pairs that might be included in the final product.

I suggest working on the Q&A portion first, as it gives the students something to do—listening back to their interview, typing up their notes. The more difficult piece may be the profile writing. Here, we go back to Alex Frank’s encounter with Lana Del Rey. As a quick in-class activity, we will read through Frank’s introduction and pull out five details he includes in his piece: the setting of the interview; LDR’s age; what LDR is wearing. In other words, paint a picture for the reader of what the scene looked like while you were there and how your subject presented him/herself. What details help us get to know this

person better? Prior to composition, I will introduce the “How to Write an Effective Story” rules. Similar to the “How to Conduct a Successful Interview” guidelines, these rules mix tips from Goldberg and Sager with my own observations as a former journalist.

Once the piece is written—students will be given time during class to compose—it will be edited before it’s submitted. This happens two ways. The first is self-editing, where the writer looks over his or her work to ensure it meets the requirements of the assignment. Here, students will go back to the “How to Write an Effective Story” rules and use them as a checklist. Then there is peer editing. Using desk partners as editors, students will swap their pieces and offer one piece of positive feedback (something the writer did well) and two suggestions for improvement (things the writer missed or didn’t do well, and should go back to address). Once editing has taken place, students are ready to submit their final, polished draft in electronic form. Hopefully, this is only the first of many more journalism experiences to come.

Appendix

This curriculum unit is aligned to the Delaware Common Core State Standards under Writing: Grade 9-10. Students will develop their topics—in this case, their interview subjects—with well-chosen, relevant, and sufficient facts, concrete details, quotations, or other information appropriate to the audience’s knowledge of the topic/subject. They will produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style of the writing are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. Students will also develop and strengthen their writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

Sample Essential Questions

At Hodgson, our essential questions (EQs) are designed to drive our lessons and must be posted in the classroom. These are also included under Classroom Activities.

Unit EQ: How can we write about other people?

Lesson EQ: What is journalism, and why is it important?

Lesson EQ: How do writers detail their subjects in order to connect with readers?

Lesson EQ: How can we be effective journalists?

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Carlson, Peter. “Words of wisdom (and malarkey) from the famous.” *Los Angeles Times*.
Published Jan. 11, 2008 and accessed Dec. 13, 2017.
<http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jan/11/entertainment/et-magazines11>.

A brief history of the “What I’ve Learned” interview feature in *Esquire* magazine, created by writer Mike Sager, whose work is cited throughout this unit.

CollegeBoard. *SpringBoard English Language Arts Grade 9*. USA: 2014.
The textbook we use in 9th-grade ELA.

Corsello, Andrew. “The Wronged Man.” Originally published November 2004 in *GQ* magazine. Reprinted in *The Best American Magazine Writing*. New York: Columbia University Press: 2005.

Corsello’s National Magazine Award-nominated profile of Calvin Willis, a Louisiana man accused of a rape he didn’t commit and imprisoned for 22 years until his release in 2003. The story was made into a Lifetime Movie Network film.

Frank, Alex. “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness: A Conversation with Lana Del Rey.” Pitchfork.com. Published July 19, 2017 and accessed Dec. 13, 2017.
<http://pitchfork.com/features/interview/life-liberty-and-the-pursuit-of-happiness-a-conversation-with-lana-del-rey/>.

An in-depth profile/Q&A hybrid with the pop-music star that serves as a valuable teaching tool.

Goldberg, Julia. *Inside Story: Everyone’s Guide to Reporting and Writing Creative Nonfiction*. Sante Fe: Leaf Storm Press, 2017.

Julia Goldberg, former editor of the *Sante Fe Reporter*-turned-writing teacher, offers advice for young reporters and writing exercises for instructors teaching journalism in this resource, told with humor and narrative flair.

Greene, Jayson. “Death Is Real: Mount Eerie’s Phil Elverum Copes with Unspeakable Tragedy.” Pitchfork.com, published March 13, 2017 and accessed Dec. 13, 2017. <https://pitchfork.com/features/profile/10034-death-is-real-mount-eries-phil-elverum-cope-with-unspeakable-tragedy/>.

Reporter Jayson Greene spends two days with Phil Elverum as the renowned musician prepares for the release of his latest album under the name Mount Eerie, *A Crow Looked at Me*, about the death of Elverum’s wife the previous year.

Harris, Joe. *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006.

Seminar leader and University of Delaware professor Joe Harris’ guide to having students work with pieces of writing in order to strengthen their own.

Martin, Steve. “The Death of My Father.” *The New Yorker*. June 17, 2002.

As the title suggests, the comedian and actor reflects on the death of his father Glenn, remembering him as both stern and loving.

Sager, Mike. "Fifty-One Ways to Improve Your Writing." Accessed Dec. 13, 2017.
<http://www.mikesager.com/tips/fifty-one-ways-to-improve-your-writing>.

Award-winning veteran journalist Mike Sager offers—per the title—51 ways to be a better writer.

Sager, Mike. "Fifty-Three Ways to Improve Your Reporting." Accessed Dec. 13, 2017.
<http://www.mikesager.com/tips/fifty-three-ways-to-improve-your-reporting>.

More tips on being a better writer from the experienced journalist.

Sager, Mike. "Tom Petty: What I've Learned." *Esquire*. Originally published in the August 2006 print edition of the magazine, reprinted Oct. 2, 2017 and accessed Dec. 13, 2017. <http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/music/a889/tom-petty-what-ive-learned-interview/>.

Sager's interview with the heartland rock legend, reprinted online following Petty's death in 2017.

Zemler, Emily. "Morgan Freeman: What I've Learned." *Esquire*. Published March 3, 2016 and accessed Dec. 13, 2017. <http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/interviews/a42686/morgan-freeman-what-ive-learned/>.

A model Q&A for the classroom with a figure students will recognize.

Resources

Classroom Handout A

How to Construct a Successful Interview

1. *Record the interview.* Do this using your phone (if possible) a digital or cassette recorder (if you have one or can borrow one), or a laptop using the camera/movie feature (again, if you have one or can borrow one). Also jot down notes as a back-up during the interview. If the above methods are not available—or your technology fails—your notes go from back-up source to main source, and they will save your efforts.
2. *Ask "open" questions.* Goldberg offers a useful table to distinguish between open and closed questions (see below).
3. *Stay interested and look for follow-up questions.* Look around the room or interview space for details and take note of what's happening during the interview, including minor details such as what the subject is wearing or time of day. You may not use these, but it's better to be prepared with more material than less.
4. *Conduct the interview face-to-face, not over the phone/Skype/FaceTime.* Facial

expressions go a long way in conveying your subject's thoughts and ideas. It always helps to determine whether a subject is joking or wants to be taken seriously.

5. *Be yourself; try to have a conversation as much as an interview.* Sager says: "In natural conversation, people cut one another off. Don't be afraid to cut off a long-winded answer by redirecting with another question."⁴³
6. *Let people talk but don't be afraid to interrupt if you miss or don't understand something.* "Sometimes people say things that are confusing—either because the subject is complicated or because the person talking is inarticulate," Goldberg writes.⁴⁴ "It can be easy to simply write down what a person says and regurgitate it with no real understanding, but that's not the goal of interviewing."⁴⁵

Of course, the greatest interview in the world can come and go if it's not documented in a well-told, effective story. To this end, here are some rules to follow for transcribing the interview into an effective Q&A or profile.

Classroom Handout B

How to Write an Effective Story

1. *For Q&As, write like you're having an important conversation.* Type up all of the questions and answers. Then, think of how a conversation starts and ends. The 10 question-and-answer responses you end up using in your transcript may not be the "best" of the bunch. Rather, they should flow and feel like a natural conversation.
2. *For profiles, write like you're making a movie.* Films and TV programs show us what happens, and what to pay attention to, through the use of camera angles, lighting, set design, and music. Writers don't have that luxury, but they can make up for it with details, giving the reader a vivid picture of what it was like to be there. Sager encourages writers to "use all five senses," but to also ask themselves "why am I using this detail?" as a way to keep the reader's interest.⁴⁶
3. *Keep it simple.* Write in short, simple sentences that convey ideas quickly. Avoid wordiness; you can add and change your prose later. Read over your work as it's written, looking to break up sentences into shorter statements.
4. *Remember what your "project" is.* The purpose of the writing assignment, in both Q&A and profile versions, is to focus on the most important lesson the subject has learned or piece of advice the subject has to offer. Perhaps this is the first thing you mention at the beginning of your piece, or the first question-and-answer response you include. Perhaps you wait until the very end to reveal it. Either way,

build your writing around this idea and make sure the reader knows what it is before the piece is over.

5. *Include a great title.* Think strong. Think big. Think poetically. “The Death of My Father” and “The Wronged Man” may work as examples here, as their titles waste no time in telling us what these stories are about. Short, simple phrases work well, as do verbs ending in -ing: *speaking, talking, wishing, running.*

Classroom Handout C

Open vs. Closed Questions via Julia Goldberg’s *Inside Story*, p. 57

Open	Closed
What is it like to be 18 in this political climate?	How old are you?
What’s an alternative career you could imagine for yourself and why?	What are you studying?
Describe your relationship with your family.	How many siblings do you have?
When did you realize you wanted to...?	Where did you grow up?

Additional Resources

CollegeBoard. SpringBoard English Language Arts Grade 9. USA: 2014.
The textbook we use in 9th-grade ELA.

Cox, Ana Marie. “Angie Martinez Doesn’t Like to Crush People’s Hopes.” *The New York Times Magazine*. April 28, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/01/magazine/angie-martinez-doesnt-like-to-crush-peoples-hopes.html>.

This Q&A with New York’s Power 105.1 FM radio host, author, and occasional music artist Angie Martinez will be used as an extension activity during the first day’s lesson to help students see the value in asking certain questions.

Cox, Ana Marie. “DJ Khaled Is Extra Careful Around Beyonce.” *The New York Times Magazine*. May 11, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/15/magazine/dj-khaled-is-extra-careful-around-beyonce.html>.

This Q&A with hip-hop mega-producer, household name, and shameless self-promoter DJ Khaled will be used as an extension activity during the first day’s lesson to help students see the value in asking certain questions.

Notes

- ¹ Julia Goldberg, *Inside Story: Everyone's Guide to Reporting and Writing Creative Nonfiction* (Sante Fe: Leaf Storm Press, 2017), 44.
- ² Julia Goldberg, *Inside Story: Everyone's Guide to Reporting and Writing Creative Nonfiction* (Sante Fe: Leaf Storm Press, 2017), 50.
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- ⁴ Peter Carlson, "Words of wisdom (and malarkey) from the famous," *Los Angeles Times*, accessed Dec. 13, 2017, <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jan/11/entertainment/et-magazines11>.
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- ¹⁰ Julia Goldberg, *Inside Story: Everyone's Guide to Reporting and Writing Creative Nonfiction* (Sante Fe: Leaf Storm Press, 2017), 53.
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- ¹² Julia Goldberg, *Inside Story: Everyone's Guide to Reporting and Writing Creative Nonfiction* (Sante Fe: Leaf Storm Press, 2017), 45.
- ¹³ Steve Martin, "The Death of My Father," *The New Yorker*, June 17, 2002.
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- ¹⁸ Andrew Corsello, "The Wronged Man," *The Best American Magazine Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 51.
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- 33 Joe Harris, *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006), 17.
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