

## Reading Reportage: Some First Principles

**First**, that what a work of narrative journalism *asks us to do* is “interpret the world” in a particular way. The analogy I often rely on is to think of a work of reportage as a little like a “lens” through which we look at the world—a lens like you find on a telescope, or a microscope, or in pairs on a set of reading glasses. I also think it really helps to think of the *physical structure* of a lens, and what it does to our line of sight. A lens has edges, first of all—a bit like the rims on a pair of glasses. Perhaps sometimes we can see around or outside those edges, but a lens asks us first to see *through* its glass—to see the “world” it frames for us, through the lens itself. But we also know that this glass is curved: it allows us to zoom in on something more closely, see it better than we might otherwise might; and, as a result, the lens necessarily also causes some things to be *less* in focus, perhaps things that are in the foreground or in the background or outside the lens altogether. When I say a work of narrative journalism is an “interpretation,” this is what I will mean: that it shapes our viewing and our understanding of its topic (poverty or war or crime, and so on). A work of reportage is not, therefore, a clear window or a mirror or anything like that: instead, it causes our line of sight to be affected, reshaped, so that we see in a particular way.



And **secondly**, we reconstruct that lens through four **dimensions** of reading, as follows:

1. When it comes to reading works of narrative journalism, we often read for content. That is, as I’ve already indicated, we read such works for what they can tell about pressing social problems or conditions--that’s pretty obvious. We want to learn about poverty, or what it’s like to be a prison guard, or to be a soldier in a counterinsurgency war, and so on. In other words, we read for the “what”—and in many instances, for the “**news content**”—probably because recent events have made the issues at the heart of the work we’re reading seem important.
2. However, there is usually an additional reason we turn to a work of reportage rather than, say, a sociological study or a report from the United Nations. We read reportage, quite often, **because it typically tells us a “story”** that engages our imagination, our empathy, and even our sense of excitement or sorrow. In other words, there’s another, often-overlooked reason for reading—that, perhaps, we don’t acknowledge at first, especially when thinking about serious works of journalism. And that is that in the most basic sense, of course, we often read for *pleasure*.

Now, by “pleasure” I don’t simply mean that reading makes us happy or uplifted or “entertained” in the usual sense. Rather, what I mean is that we read because we love being “caught up in the story,” whisked away to new worlds, having our imaginations invited to sympathize or empathize with people we’ve never met, facing problems quite different (and often larger) than we face ourselves. And as it turns out, this aspect of reading for pleasure has a lot to do with the pull and sway of narrative journalism over us—with how we identify with certain characters, see the world from their vantage point, and so on.

So here's where the difference I'm suggesting will come into play. I will also be asking you to **read for what I'll be calling the “story-form.”** I've added this additional word after the hyphen (“-form”) because, paradoxically, this is actually a kind of pleasure or engagement we have to learn to look at *critically*. That is, if we are caught up or emotionally moved by a nonfiction narrative, we also have to learn how to turn things around, and look into its inner, stylistic architecture—to understand how it’s been working on us.

3. And that brings in the **third** thing to be looking “for” when you read narrative journalism—we should also be aware of the fact that there’s a lot of work—“legwork,” reporters often call it—*behind* the text we’re reading. Or rather, the labor and the experiences *behind* a work of reportage is quite commonly depicted *in it*. Whether we realize it or not, then, we also should be reading “for” this third layer—***for how the reporter says he or she researched the work and put it together.***

4. Fourthly, you should read for what I call “**reading for the subject**”—or, what in journalistic circles is often referred to as the “subject’s” story, the “subject” being the person (or persons) about whom the story is written. That is, in any work of journalism, the reporter has usually come to rely upon—or, in some instances, modify or contradict—the story told by the actors or players *in* the tale that is being told. Perhaps these people are sources for the story; perhaps they are characters at the center of what we’re reading; perhaps they’re on the edges of the action, and we barely notice them. What I’m going to be suggesting, though, is that one of the best ways to achieve an active, critical reading is to use your wits and your imagination to tease out *how those subjects might themselves tell their story*. And then, if you can, see how it “matches up” with what the reporter has been telling you. And even where it doesn't.



**The central premise of the course is that works of narrative journalism are especially unique and challenging precisely *because*, unlike many other kinds of texts we encounter, arriving at a critical reading typically involves thinking about these four crucial dimensions, often at the same time. Or, as I'll be saying, "Reading in 4-D."**

