

# EN204: Writing for Online Environments

## Course Overview

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Snaps, tweets, Facebook posts, Instagram stories, LinkedIn profiles, Ask-Me-Anything Reddit threads, live blogs of the Oscars red carpet, product descriptions on Wayfair and Overstock, two-starred reviews of pencil sharpeners on Amazon, episode descriptions (that don't spoil the plot) on Hulu's *Handmaid's Tale*, slideshows of Halloween party snack ideas at Food Network, comments on YouTube videos of corgis tearing up a sock, up-to-the-minute coverage of a political scandal with embedded multimedia content at the New York Times website.

We are surrounded by (and we spend a fair amount of our days composing) writing for online environments. And we instinctively know that posting on the internet is different from writing an essay for a college class, but how many of us can say exactly how? Is it just the double spacing? This course will explore online writing, helping you become more familiar with

- the genres common in online writing;
- the technology that enables you to write, edit, and collaborate online; and
- the ethics that guide us to fair and equitable uses of online content.

## Core Learning Outcomes

At the conclusion of the course, learners will be able to:

1. Navigate the rhetorical challenges and technological advantages of writing in online environments
2. Apply principles concerning ethics, plagiarism, and copyright to publishing in online environments
3. Utilize modern processes and technologies for writing and editing online
4. Create highly readable and usable webtexts in a variety of common genres

## Major Assignments

Students compose the following common web genres during the course:

- Press Release
- Feature Article Query
- Tutorial
- Blog Post
- Listicle
- Social Media Campaign
- Product Review
- Feature Article (core assessment)

## Technical Skills

While students don't learn HTML or web design, they do learn to compose in Markdown, a simple markup language that can be used to compose texts destined for HTML.

- They complete this Markdown Tutorial: <https://www.markdowntutorial.com>
- They read about structuring webtexts: <http://groversenglish.com/articles/webdocumentsrequirestructure.php>
- Many of their assignments are composed using this (or another) Markdown editor: <https://dillinger.io>
- They are encouraged to think about common and advanced elements of webtext structure and formatting, as illustrated in the attached reading "Advanced Web Formatting Elements."

## Readings

The class utilizes freely available online readings and resources. Readings help students understand the standards associated with each of the genres of web writing they need to compose.

Students also are required to choose a writing manual from a list of approved options (many of which are commonly available in public libraries and 3 of which are available electronically through Park's library). Students read their chosen manual and use it as the basis for three of the projects: the blog post, the listicle, and the product review.

## Feature Article (Core Assessment) Overview

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The major project in this course is to **compose a feature article for a web-based media outlet**. We'll be working on this project throughout the semester, going through the same process a freelance writer would use to research, pitch, write, and publish a feature.

### What Is a Feature Article?

In the days of print, a **feature** was the cover story in a magazine or an in-depth report in a newspaper, often with a headline on the front page.



In the digital age, it's much harder to define what a feature is because the internet has multiplied the number and types of publications, each with their own idea of what a feature can be. In general, however, features tend to

- be longer than the average article that the outlet publishes,
- be more extensively researched and reported,
- include more and larger pictures,
- include other visual and multimedia elements (like maps, graphs, embedded video, etc.),
- be more prominently placed on the outlet's homepage, and
- be more loudly announced in the outlet's social media and marketing efforts.

Still, even within that rough definition, there is a wide variety of features out there on the web today, so we'll be exploring what specific media outlets produce.

## What Will Your Feature Include?

Here is the official assignment description for the feature article:

### Your feature article should:

- be a nonfiction piece of writing at least 2000 words in length
- provide quality, in-depth content about a subject
- be suitable for publication at a professional website
- involve some kind of research or reporting (not necessarily scholarly research—you could do interviewing, testing, visiting locations, browsing the web or library, etc.)
- include visual components to accompany the text (photographs, charts, maps, etc.)
- follow the style of your target website (i.e., it should include pull quotes, captions, deckheads, headings and subheadings, bolding, linking in and out, and other elements that your target site typically includes)

**NOTE:** Your feature should be at least 2000 words long even if your target site doesn't typically publish pieces of that length. In that case, just pretend the editor of the site has given you special permission to try out a new, longer form.

## What Will the Process Be?

A freelance writer hoping to get a feature published would follow a process something like this:

1. Come up with an idea for a feature article, a topic area to investigate
2. Research potential media outlets that might like the idea to get a sense of what they are looking for
3. Pitch the idea to the outlet's editor using a query email
4. Write a draft of the feature and work with the editor to refine the draft
5. Publish the finished article

We will be following a similar process this semester as we complete the following assignments:

- During Unit 1, you will complete the **Brainstorm Topics and Sites** assignment to generate ideas for your feature.
- During Units 2, 3, and 4, you will research potential media outlets that might be a good fit for your feature idea by completing three **Target Site Analysis** assignments.
- At the end of Unit 4, you'll turn in your **Feature Article Query**, which is an email to your target site's editor, formally pitching your idea. The "editor" (your instructor) will respond to your idea with advice on how to make it best fit the site's style.
- At the end of Unit 6, you'll turn in the **Update Editor** assignment, which will contain a complete rough draft of your feature article as well as some visual elements you hope to use. Again your "editor" will respond with feedback on how to make the article better and a better fit for the site.
- The final draft of the **Feature Article** will then be submitted to your "editor" for publication at the end of Unit 8.

## Some Sample Feature Ideas

While you should feel free to follow your interests, here are a few example types of features that might inspire your imagination:

- The *Washington Post's* "[The White Flight of Derek Black](#)" by Eli Saslow is a traditional feature from a mainstream journalism source. With deep reporting based on extended interviews with multiple people, it's a page-turner. Maybe an interview-based feature is right for you?
- The *New York Times Magazine's* "[The 25 Songs that Matter Right Now](#)" is a more modern feature in that it takes advantage of what the web has to offer beyond simple print. It uses embedded audio, interactive navigation, changing backgrounds, and alternative layouts to show what is possible.
- The *New York Times's* [Smarter Living](#) section is full of articles about how to live a better life. They also publish a series of [in-depth guides](#) to popular topics.

- Serious Eats' [How To](#) section publishes informative articles on cooking and entertaining. The article "[Why Cookbook Clubs Should Be the New Way We Entertain](#)" is a great example of a feature: part personal essay, part tutorial.
- Lifehacker publishes articles similar to Smarter Living. They also run a [Back to Basics](#) series about seemingly foundational skills and a [How I Work](#) series that are interviews with highly productive people.
- Eater publishes interactive maps of restaurants in major cities, such as [this one of bakeries in New York](#). (Great, now I'm hungry for babka.)
- Wirecutter is a produce review site, but they also publish features in the form of topical guides that aggregate products from a category along with tips on how to use them effectively, like this article, "[How We Optimize a Morning Routine for Kids](#)."
- The *New York Times*' Travel section publishes a weekly feature called [36 Hours](#) in which they present a travel itinerary that can be completed in a day and a half.

Be sure to talk with your instructor about your ideas—he or she can help you see possibilities you hadn't considered before.