Obituaries can make us laugh or cry. They can highlight great deeds of the dearly departed. Or they might offer witty or poignant stories of flawed folks. Obits can be morality tales or highlight intriguing irony. Ideally, well-written obits take us along on the life journeys of the famous, the infamous and the hardly known.


We’ll go inside The New York Times to meet the obituary writers who are true artists. And we’ll listen to humorist Mo Rocca’s irreverent Mobituaries about people, ideas and social movements.

While this is not a writing course per se, I'll help those who wish try your hand at writing an OBIT – a short story of a life well lived, or at least reasonably well lived. Perhaps an obit of a relative or a friend, or maybe even the first draft of what they call “an advance obit” for yourself!
Granted, obituaries are about death. But we’ll be focusing on the stories of the living before they shuffled off to the mortal coil.

This topic certainly lends itself to a good deal of reflection on how others have lived their lives as well as how we mark our own years on this Earth. Thus, we’ll have plenty of discussion in each class as we react to a range of obituaries and ponder what it means to live a good life or at least a reasonably good one.

Our readings for this course will come primarily from two books. Both are available in paperback through your favorite bookstore or from Amazon.


We also will read a variety of Obituaries from other sources that I will be sending you weekly.

Here is a “Draft” of our Syllabus for the course. Since this is a “new” course and I need to be responding to how it’s going, I’ll be editing and adding as we move forward.
Weekly Schedule
(Draft – Revisions to Come)

Week #1: September 19th

- Introduction by Jim Sheeler in *Obit*
  pp. vii-ix

  pp. 1-5 (In *Obit* by Sheeler)

- “I Walk the Dead Beat” – Marilyn Johnson
  pp. 1-12 (in *The Dead Beat* by Marilyn Johnson)

- “Obit: Life on Deadline” – In-Class Video exploring the obituary writers at *The New York Times*.

Week #2: September 26th

- “*Obit*” – Obituaries of Selzer, Chapple, Jr., Schmidt, Engel, Scordo and Anderson (pp. 6-42)

- “A Wake of Obituarists” and “Name That Bit” in Johnson
  pp. 13-42

- “Obit: Life on Deadline” – In-Class Video exploring the obituary writers at *The New York Times*.

- “mobituaries” by Mo Rocca – In-Class Audio
Week #3: October 3<sup>rd</sup>

- “Obit” – Obituaries of Conda, Gray, Foley, Trujilo, Preston and Papadakis (pp. 43-76)
- “The Mighty and the Fallen of New York” and “Now You Know” in Johnson (pp. 43-88)
- “Obit: Life on Deadline” – In-Class Video exploring the obituary writers at The New York Times.

Week #4: October 10<sup>th</sup>

- “Obit” – Obituaries of Peck, Druva, Evans, Coble and Davis/Jones/Sanders (pp. 77-108)
- “Ordinary Joe” and “The Egalitarians” in Johnson (pp. 89-114)
- “mobituaries” by Mo Rocca – In-Class Audio

Week #5: October 17<sup>th</sup>

- “Obit” – Obituaries of Evans, Donnelly, Wagster, Roling, Foley, and McClelland (pp. 109-141)
- “Tributes” in Johnson (pp. 115-142)
- “mobituaries” by Mo Rocca – In-Class Audio
- Obits from Class Members who wish to share
Week #6: October 24th

• “Obit” – Obituaries of Rock, Conner, Griffith, Davies, Harris, and Dunwiddie/Eldridge (pp. 142-177)

• “The Four Horsemen of Apocalypse” in Johnson (pp. 143-182)

• “mobituaries” by Mo Rocca – In-Class Audio

• Obits from Class Members who wish to share

Week #7: October 31st

• “Obit” – Obituaries of Hagler, Robinson, Valdez, Sheehy, Coombs and Albrandt (pp. 178-203)

• “Googling Death” in Johnson (pp. 183-204)

• Obits from Class Members who wish to share

Week #8: November 7th

• “Obit” – Obituaries of Jaffe, McGuire, Sarlo, Helgoth, Grunberger and Richardson (pp. 204-239)

• “The Obit Writer’s Obit” and the Epilogue in Johnson (pp. 205-232)

• Obits from Class Members who wish to share
Bob Steele loves to read obituaries. He's trying to figure out what he might include and what he would leave out if he wrote his own obit. His life journey includes growing up in small-town Indiana, Army service in Vietnam, and careers as a journalist and college professor. He has lots to be proud of and some things to regret.