

New (Literary) Journalism

Literary journalism is a form of [nonfiction](#) that combines factual reporting with some of the [narrative](#) techniques and stylistic strategies traditionally associated with fiction. Also called *narrative journalism*.

In his ground-breaking anthology *The Literary Journalists* (1984), Norman Sims observed that literary journalism "demands immersion in complex, difficult subjects. The voice of the writer surfaces to show that an author is at work."

The term *literary journalism* is sometimes used interchangeably with [creative nonfiction](#); more often, however, it is regarded as one *type* of creative nonfiction.

Highly regarded literary journalists in the U.S. today include [John McPhee](#), Jane Kramer, Mark Singer, and Richard Rhodes. Some notable literary journalists of the past century include Stephen Crane, Jack London, George Orwell, and Tom Wolfe.

Classic Examples of Literary Journalism

- ["A Hanging" by George Orwell](#)
- ["The San Francisco Earthquake" by Jack London](#)
- ["The Watercress Girl" by Henry Mayhew](#)

Observations

- "Literary journalism is not fiction--the people are real and the events occurred--nor is it journalism in a traditional sense. There is interpretation, a personal point of view, and (often) experimentation with structure and chronology. Another essential element of literary journalism is its focus. Rather than emphasizing institutions, literary journalism explores the lives of those who are affected by those institutions." (Jan Whitt, *Women in American Journalism: A New History*. University of Illinois Press, 2008)
- **Characteristics of Literary Journalism**
 - "Among the shared characteristics of **literary journalism** are immersion reporting, complicated structures, [character](#) development, [symbolism](#), [voice](#), a focus on ordinary people ... and accuracy. Literary journalists recognize the

need for a consciousness on the page through which the objects in view are filtered.

- "A list of characteristics can be an easier way to define literary journalism than a formal definition or a set of rules. Well, there are some rules, but Mark Kramer used the term 'breakable rules' in an anthology we edited. Among those rules, Kramer included:

- Literary journalists immerse themselves in subjects' worlds...
- Literary journalists work out implicit covenants about accuracy and candor...
- Literary journalists write mostly about routine events.
- Literary journalists develop meaning by building upon the readers' sequential reactions.

- "... Journalism ties itself to the actual, the confirmed, that which is not simply imagined... Literary journalists have adhered to the rules of accuracy--or mostly so--precisely because their work cannot be labeled as journalism if details and characters are imaginary." (Norman Sims, *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism*. Northwestern University Press, 2008)
- "As defined by Thomas B. Connery, **literary journalism** is 'nonfiction printed prose whose verifiable content is shaped and transformed into a story or sketch by use of narrative and [rhetorical](#) techniques generally associated with fiction.' Through these stories and sketches, authors 'make a statement, or provide an interpretation, about the people and culture depicted.' Norman Sims adds to this definition by suggesting the [genre](#) itself allows readers to 'behold others' lives, often set within far clearer contexts than we can bring to our own.' He goes on to suggest, 'There is something intrinsically political—and strongly democratic—about literary journalism—something pluralistic, pro-individual, anti-cant, and anti-elite.' Further, as John E. Hartsock points out, the bulk of work that has been considered literary journalism is composed 'largely by professional journalists or those writers whose industrial means of production is to be found in the newspaper and magazine press, thus making them at least for the interim de facto journalists.' Common to many definitions of literary journalism is that the work itself should contain some kind of higher truth; the stories themselves may be said to be emblematic of a larger truth." (Amy Mattson Lauters, ed., *The Rediscovered Writings of Rose Wilder Lane, Literary Journalist*. University of Missouri Press, 2007)

- "Through [dialogue](#), words, the presentation of the scene, you can turn over the material to the reader. The reader is ninety-some percent of what's creative in creative writing. A writer simply gets things started." (John McPhee, quoted by Norman Sims in "The Art of Literary Journalism." *Literary Journalism*, ed. by Norman Sims and Mark Kramer. Ballantine, 1995)

Notes courtesy Richard Nordquist: <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-literary-journalism-1691132>