

## Bortree, Denise Sevick

---

**From:** Bortree, Denise Sevick  
**Sent:** Tuesday, November 10, 2020 3:40 PM  
**To:** L-COMM-FACULTY@LISTS.PSU.EDU  
**Subject:** Teaching Tuesdays - Live-In by Boaz Dvir

# TEACHING



# TUESDAYS

Welcome to Teaching Tuesdays! I hope you've been spending time outside enjoying this beautiful weather. This week, Boaz Dvir writes about the "live-in" assignment, a type of first-person story that challenges students toward new experiences. It's another great idea from a faculty member. Thanks to everyone who has written so far; you're reinforcing a culture of excellent teaching in the college. Have a good week. Denise


### SRTEs for Fall 2020

SRTE scores for Fall 2020 will only be available to the instructor. The university has also *eliminated many of the questions on the form and rewritten the two key questions* – course effectiveness (A3) and instructor effectiveness (A4) – to focus on instructor efforts. Another important change to SRTE scores for Fall 2020 – you will not receive a mean score for A3 and A4. Instead, the university has decided to provide two scores of central tendency, median and mode. *More information will be coming about reporting your teaching successes in Digital Measures.*

### Alternative Grading for Fall 2020

[Alternative grading](#) has been reinstated for Fall 2020. Students with an academic integrity violation will not be eligible to select alternative grading in the course. More information on implications of the policy will be forthcoming.

### Wellness days ideas for asynchronous courses

[Wellness days for Spring 2021](#) have been announced as Tuesday, Feb. 9, Thursday, March 11 and Wednesday, April 7. This applies to all face-to-face and remote synchronous courses. If you are teaching an **asynchronous course** in spring, here are some ideas to help you plan for wellness time off for students:  [Spring 21 WC Wellness Weeks-DIST.docx](#). The document offers recommended programming and resources.

---

## Buying into the Live-In

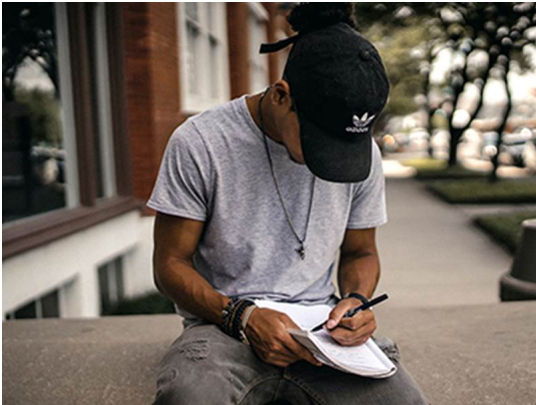
By Boaz Dvir, Assistant Professor, Journalism

When I started teaching in 2004, I had no intention of letting my journalism students write in the first person. I feared allowing such "navel gazing" would only encourage them to stay in their comfort zone and quote roommates and romantic partners instead of cultivating credible sources outside their immediate sphere.

As my first semester gained steam, however, I realized that first-person writing offers students a distinctive, valuable challenge. It can help aspiring nonfiction storytellers, bloggers, travel writers, and others develop useful skills.

It also occurred to me that, if Joan Didion and Tom Wolfe were barred from writing in the first person, they might have never given us New Journalism. Besides, I felt somewhat hypocritical, since I wrote quite extensively in the first person. Several studies, such as [“‘She’ Is Not Like ‘I’”](#), confirmed what I had noticed about my own first-person writing: When done effectively, it can boost reader engagement and emotional impact.

So, I started giving my students the option of making one of their assignments a first-person story. I continue to do so 16 years later. I emphasize to my students that they must adhere to the same journalistic principles of sourcing, accuracy, fairness, balance, relevancy, and timeliness as they would in a more traditional, third-person story. I note that they must still meet all our objectives, such as knowing and serving their audience and contributing to the conversation around whatever topic they tackle.



Equally important, I stress that they should only choose this option if it is safe and feels right. For instance, if telling a story in the first person about depression takes them to a dark place, they should pick a different topic or choose a different approach.

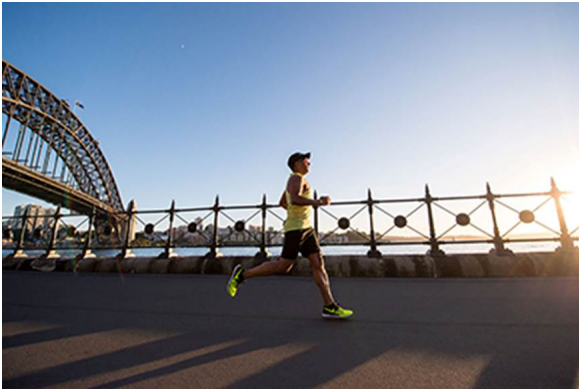
About a third of my students give this a try. Some “fail.” They often find it daunting to be forthcoming. Self-discovery sometimes leads them down a path they prefer to avoid. So they shift gears, documenting other people’s trials, tribulations, and triumphs. But even simply attempting to tell a story in the first person can prove beneficial. My students gain insight about themselves and storytelling; they obtain a greater understanding for what they’re asking of their sources; and they experience the upside of failing, which can propel growth just as well as success.

One of my students’ favorite first-person approaches is the “live-in” story. During this form of participatory journalism, the writer puts herself through a prescribed new experience, such as practicing yoga twice a day for a month. The writer keeps a record of its effects on a variety of variables.

This approach was perhaps best exemplified by Morgan Spurlock in “Super Size Me” and George Plimpton in “Paper Lion.” Of course, I would never let my students put their health at risk like Spurlock, who ate only McDonald’s food for 30 days, and Plimpton, who besides trying out for the Detroit Lions also boxed with Sugar Ray Robinson and Archie Moore and played in an NHL preseason game.

Although my students engage in much safer activities, they often push themselves:

- One of my Advanced Multimedia Reporting students went vegan for the first time in his life—during the month leading up to the Boston Marathon. As he trained hard for the biggest event of his running career, he shunned the staples of his regular diet, meat and dairy.
- One of my Feature Writing students paused a daily practice she had started as a preteen—spending an hour every morning putting on makeup. She said the live-in assignment gave her an opportunity to break a habit she felt no longer served her well.
- One of my iPhone Journalism students attempted to quit smoking during the spring COVID-19 lockdown. A few days into his live-in experience, his girlfriend, also a heavy smoker, joined him.



How did they fare? Besides producing compelling, interesting nonfiction stories:

- The runner completed the Boston Marathon and, last time I spoke with him a year ago, told me that, although he returned to consuming meat and dairy, he continues to eat a lot more vegetables than he used to.
- My Feature Writing student said the live-in experience helped her turn what she considered a burdensome habit into more of a hobby. She told me she no longer spends an hour each weekday morning putting on makeup. And when she does—mostly before going out—she enjoys it a great deal more.
- The smoker said filming the ups and downs of his quest helped keep him focused and motivated to quit. By the time he turned in this assignment, he succeeded. So did his girlfriend.

First-person storytelling is not for everyone. But for those who choose this option, it can provide a singular learning experience.

---

Hope you enjoyed this issue. Keep an eye out for Teaching Tuesdays every Tuesday this semester. Want to read an earlier issue? You can find it in the Faculty/Staff Resources: <https://www.bellisario.psu.edu/faculty-staff-resources/teaching-tuesdays>

TEACHING TUESDAYS – Issue #11

Denise Sevick Bortree, Ph.D.  
Associate Dean for Academic Affairs  
Director, Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Public Communication  
Professor, Communications  
Bellisario College of Communications  
Penn State University  
[www.thepagecenter.org](http://www.thepagecenter.org)