

This is a generic version of an actual syllabus available the first day of class or shortly before.

Current Topics in Science, Health and Environmental Journalism
G54.1017 – SHERP

Instructor: Dan Fagin
Associate Professor of Journalism
Associate Director, Science, Health and Environmental Reporting Program

Overview

This aim of this course is to introduce you to the world of science journalism through case studies of topics that are at the cutting edge of current research and also have profound implications for the way we live. In other words, they are the raw material for great journalism.

As you immerse yourselves in some challenging areas of current science, you will read the work of highly accomplished researchers and journalists, and will also hear from them directly in class. Our goal throughout will be to understand and adopt the practices that the very best science journalists use when they cover newsworthy and often controversial science. You will learn how journalists interact with scientists, do research, organize information and write stories.

Just as importantly, you will be sharpening your skills by writing frequently for the SHERP webzine, *Scienceline* (www.scienceline.org). You'll be covering an assigned beat and will be following the peer-reviewed journals and other sources to stay on top of the news as it happens.

If all goes well, you won't just be studying science news, you'll be breaking it.

Course Structure

We will begin the semester by focusing on the basics of covering science news, including working a beat, mining the journals, recognizing news and developing reporting strategies. We will then plunge into our case studies, with short interruptions to focus on editing, web-based research and incorporating dissenting views into your story.

In addition to learning the tools and practicing the techniques science journalists use to cover breaking news, we will explore seven topics as in-depth case studies, with distinguished visiting journalists and scientists as our guides. This semester, those seven topics will be:

- Drug treatment of parolees
- Neural prosthetics
- Cosmic rays
- Autism: gene-environment interactions
- AIDS vaccine research
- Bee colony collapse: the viral hypothesis
- The neuroscience of fear
- Neutrinos

In each case, you will join in the questioning of our visiting experts and will practice transforming what they say into engaging and accurate journalism.

Writing Assignments

There will be frequent writing assignments, both in and out of class. In addition to writing about our case studies, you will write (and re-write!) at least three stories off of your assigned beat: a 500-word news story, a 500-word event story, and an 800-word issue piece. Some of your work, if done well, will end up being published in *Scienceline*, the webzine you will be running starting in December.

You will not all be writing about the same things. Instead, we will follow a newsroom model in this class, with each of you covering a designated beat. You will be expected to keep up to date with newly published research in *Science*, *Nature* and other scientific journals, as well as in science magazines and *The New York Times*. Possible beats include: cancer, climate change, drugs (legal and illegal), energy, environmental health, genetics, medical practice, microbes: viruses and bacteria, ecology/nature, neuroscience and the brain, physics/chemistry/math, psychology and behavior, space and astronomy, stem cells and cloning, and technology.

At the beginning of every class, I'll ask one or two of you to briefly update the rest of us about what's new on your beat, and we'll discuss how to turn that news into a solid piece of science journalism. To be ready to report, you must follow your beat closely and continually (everything you'll need to read is available free in the SHERP common room, on the Web, or through databases you can access via NYU Home).

Note that your "event" story can be done at any time during the semester. The only requirement is that you clear the event with me before you attend, and that you e-mail me the completed story within two hours of the completion of the event.

All assignments for this class should be written in Microsoft Word (.doc files), so I can edit them and send them back with comments. If for some reason you must use some other word-processing program, it's your responsibility to make sure it's a program I can work with. Unless I tell you otherwise, you should e-mail all of your assignments as attached files to dan.fagin@nyu.edu.

Assigned Readings and Discussion

You don't need to buy any books for this class, but there will be frequent assigned readings on the web, in handouts, in PDF scans I will e-mail to you, and in the special edition of *Nieman Reports* I will hand out in class. It's very important that you do all of the assigned readings. We will be moving very quickly through a lot of material on disparate topics, and you're going to be lost unless you keep up. In-class discussion is a big part of this course (and a major component of your grade), so come to class prepared to contribute – and expect to be called upon if you don't speak up.

Grades and Editing

Learning, not grades, should be the focus of your time at SHERP. Much of the in-class writing you do will not be graded, but at least some of it will be edited. You should always be your own toughest editor, but you'll also learn by being edited by many other people: me, visiting journalists, your classmates and the editors of *Scienceline*.

Letter grades are not as important as the detailed feedback you will get from your editors, but grades do serve a useful purpose because they are a convenient way for you to gauge your progress, so you should pay attention to them.

Here is the formula I will use to calculate your final grade:

500-word news story, 20 percent of your final grade
500-word event story, 15 percent
800-word issue story, 25 percent
In-class contributions (exercises and discussion), 40 percent

For each of the three stories, your grade will be the average of the grades you receive on the first version you turn in and the rewritten version.

About story lengths: As a general rule, in your professional lives as journalists you should take assigned word limits seriously and write as close to the assigned length as you can. For the purposes of this class, I'll accept stories that are within 100 words of the assigned length. Your issue story, for instance, should be at least 700 words and no longer than 900.

Deadlines

Coping with deadlines is one of the most valuable lessons you will learn in SHERP. In the world of professional journalism you simply cannot sustain a career if you blow deadlines. If you can't meet a deadline for a written assignment in this class, I expect you to have a very good reason. Even the best reason will not be good enough to avoid being marked down for lateness.

Scheduling and Attendance

The class will meet Thursdays from 9:30 to 3:30 (including an hour break) in Room 653. When class is scheduled, I expect you to attend. If there's some good reason you must be absent, you need to let me know beforehand via e-mail or telephone.

Contacting Me, Contacting You

I regularly check e-mail, so you're welcome to contact me anytime at dan.fagin@nyu.edu. If you prefer good old-fashioned interpersonal communication – and who doesn't? – you can always call me at SHERP (212-998-7971) or at home (516-801-2477). Better still, you can always find me in my office on Tuesdays and Thursdays. It's also very important that you give me your current e-mail address, and that you check your account frequently in case I need to reach you.

Tentative Schedule

Week One – Expectations for this class, review syllabus, assign beats, 1:30 panel on science beat coverage with Jamie Talan and Michael Lemonick. Assignment for next week: Generate three story ideas on your beat and write a reporting strategy.

Week Two – Elements of a science news story and how to structure them. Workshop story ideas. Assignment for next week: Dunn/Lee readings, work on 500-word beat news story.

Week Three – Drug treatment of parolees. Guest journalist: freelancer Kyla Dunn. Guest scientist: Dr. Joshua Lee, assistant professor at NYU School of Medicine and Bellevue Hospital Center. Assignment for next week: turn in first draft of 500-word beat news story.

Week Four – Peer editing, event coverage, editing workshop. Assignment for next week: Chase/Hambrecht readings, pick topic for 800-word issue story.

Week Five – Neural prosthetics. Guest journalist: author and freelancer Victor Chase. Guest scientist Terry Hambrecht, NIH Neural Prosthesis Program. Assignment for next week: Musser/Farrar readings, write reporting strategy for 800-word issue story.

Week Six – Cosmic Rays. Guest journalist: George Musser of Scientific American. Guest scientist: Glennys Farrar, professor of physics at NYU. Assignment for next week: Neimark/Newschaffer readings, finish rewrite of 500-word beat story.

Week Seven – Autism: gene-environment interactions. Guest journalist: author and freelancer Jill Neimark. Guest scientist: Craig Newschaffer, chair of epidemiology and biostatistics, Drexel University. Assignment for week nine: Bergquist/Schlesinger readings.

Week Eight – No class

Week Nine – The search for AIDS vaccines. Guest journalist: Charles Bergquist, producer, NPR's Science Friday. Guest scientist: Dr. Sarah J. Schlesinger, associate professor of cellular physiology and immunology, Rockefeller University. Assignment for next week: Glausiusz/Lipkin readings.

Week Ten – Bee colony collapse: the viral hypothesis. Guest journalist: freelancer Josie Glausiusz. Guest scientist: Dr. Ian Lipkin, professor of epidemiology, neurology, and pathology, Columbia University. Assignment for next week: Hall/Phelps readings, turn in 800-word issue story.

Week Eleven – The neuroscience of fear. Guest journalist: author and freelancer Stephen S. Hall. Guest scientist: Elizabeth Phelps, professor of psychology, NYU.

Week Twelve – Workshop day: issue stories. Assignment for next week: Chang/Conrad readings.

Week Thirteen – Neutrinos. Guest journalist: Ken Chang of The New York Times. Guest scientist: Janet Conrad, Columbia professor of physics. Assignment for next week: Turn in rewrite of 800-word issue story.

Week Fourteen – Conclusion, assessment, and path forward.