

This is the 2009 syllabus. Current syllabus will be available the first day of class or shortly before.

NYU SHERP
Medical Writing
G54.1187.01
Thursdays, 9:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.
20 Cooper Square

Instructor:

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Email or call anytime; I don't have fixed office hours, but I'm happy to make an appointment to talk by phone or in person. Starting the second week, I'll be available at 9:15 in the classroom, for quick questions that can't wait. And of course during breaks.

Introduction

Welcome to the class that puts the "H" in SHERP. Reporting and scientific research are quite different, but in the eyes of your instructor, they share a defining characteristic: healthy skepticism. If you get only one thing out of this class, you will learn how to think critically about the medical literature and about the practice of medicine. The goal is to apply those critical thinking skills to your reporting, and to turn them into informative, appropriately skeptical, and well-written stories.

You'll get lots of practice thinking about studies like a veteran reporter does. You'll learn how to find reliable and trustworthy experts, using Medline and other databases, and how to approach and interview those sources to get the best stories.

The Assignments

Medical and health stories take many forms, and you'll get practice writing four types of pieces: spot news (one for consumers and one for professionals), a service piece, and an enterprising feature story. You'll also have the chance to rewrite. And we'll practice beat curation using Twitter.

Your assignments can build on each other. Looking forward to your enterprising piece, you may want to find sources and subject matter that will also work in earlier assignments. You can also do your assignments in any medium you'd like; ask me which might make more sense as video, audio, or other form of multimedia. Assignments are due at the START of the class. Consider posting your assignments to the Google group to get feedback from your classmates. The specific assignments and due dates are listed below in the schedule.

Readings

Your readings for the class will be distributed electronically, as part of a Google Group. The readings are assigned the class before they're due on the syllabus, and are listed on the Google Group by the class they're due (eg "September 17: context 1" means you should read that before September 17's class).

There are two books listed at the end of this syllabus, both of which you probably have by now from other courses. I won't refer to them specifically, but both are good references you should have on your shelves as science/health reporters.

Schedule

September 10:

Introductions

Review of terms

The world of medical journalism: embargoes, policy, narrative, and more

Discussion of beat curation, how we'll do this for swine flu and screening this semester using Twitter

Reading: Review <http://healthnewsreview.org/>, start reading next week's readings

Assignment (due September 17): Find three recent clinical studies that you will grow to love over the course of the semester

September 17:

Finding sources: Medline, other databases

Interviewing researchers, doctors

Context in medical stories: what is it, and how to introduce it

Discussion of <http://healthnewsreview.org>

Reading: <http://www.cancer.org/aspx/blog/Comments.aspx?id=319> (Dr. Len blog item), http://www.pharmacypracticenews.com/index.asp?section_id=57&show=columnist&article_id=3143 (my column on reading medical studies with confidence, requires free registration), <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/13/health/13lung.html> (NYT analysis of lung cancer screening trials), <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/09/us/study-is-halted-over-rise-seen-in-cancer-risk.html> (Gina Kolata story on WHI from 2002), [jamascreeing.pdf](#), [jamawhistudy.pdf](#), [nejmctscreening.pdf](#)

Assignment (due October 1): Spot news story for consumers (500 words) about a clinical trial

September 24:

Statistics I: The basics, from p values to confidence intervals

Case studies in study presentation and coverage: The WHI HRT study, CT screening for lung cancer

Reading: http://www.pharmacypracticenews.com/index.asp?show=columnist&article_id=3190§ion_id=57 (my column on relative risk),
http://www.pharmacypracticenews.com/index.asp?show=columnist&article_id=3184§ion_id=57 (my column on number needed to treat), patient 1, patient 2, patient 3

October 1:

Trades vs. consumer and how to tell the story, translating

Guest lecturer: Adam Marcus, Managing Editor of Anesthesiology News, the McMahon Group

Statistics II: how to communicate risk, and number needed to treat

Patient narrative, how to find patients

Readings: http://protomag.com/statics/MGH_F08bodyofevidence.pdf (infographic on study design by me and a colleague), endpoints, equivalence studies, sample size, ERJ letter, ERJ study

Assignment (due October 15): Spot news story (500 words) for the trade press, can be on the same study as your consumer version

Assignment (due October 8): Pick one of your three studies to present

October 8:

Statistics III: study design and how to think about alternative hypotheses; you'll present on one of your studies

Readings: service 1, service 2, service 3, NYT heart disease, NYT diabetes, NYT stents, Cohn on Moore, Health Affairs Mixed Signals, Health Affairs technology vs spending, <http://blogs.wsj.com/health/>

October 15: no class.

October 22:

Blogging about health care and medicine

Guest speaker: Jacob Goldstein, lead writer, WSJ Health Blog

In-class exercise: Blogging, followed by critiques by your class, Jacob, and me

Writing for service magazines about health

Readings: Washington Monthly alt med, , NYT gastroenterologists, NYT WHI, JAMA WHI, CDC BCG vaccine, NYT syphilis, NEJM Gardasil commentary Charo, NEJM Gardasil study

Assignment: Prepare for Pitch School

Assignment (due November 12): A service piece (800 words) in which you evaluate a

screening test or a treatment (referencing USPSTF or Cochrane Library, whichever is appropriate)

October 29:

Pitch School

Readings: Gawande McAllen New Yorker, <http://www.dartmouthatlas.org/>, AHCJ slim guide on Dartmouth Atlas, embargoes

Assignment: Enterprising feature (due November 19)

November 5:

The Dartmouth Atlas
Health care reform

Readings: Start on readings for December 3 class (see Nov. 19 readings)

November 12:

Guest speaker: George Lundberg, former editor in chief of JAMA and of Medscape/ WebMD

One-on-one feedback sessions

November 19:

Peer editing of your enterprise feature first drafts
Medical ethics and IRBs

Readings: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/17/health/17screening.html> (NYT piece on screening by Natasha Singer), <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/19/health/19cancer.html> (NYT prostate cancer screening piece by Gina Kolata), <http://www.wma.net/e/policy/b3.htm> (Declaration of Helsinki), The Scientist IRBs in crisis, NEJM IRBs and financial relationships, , nejm fda, POZ drug to pill

December 3 (no class Thanksgiving, Nov. 26):

Screening: Does it help? How are journalists covering it? A discussion based on your beat curation and your service piece findings

Guest speaker: Scott Gottlieb, former deputy commissioner, FDA

Readings: Willman NIH series, http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-kingdrewpulitzer-sg_1_2026457.story (LAT Drew series), <http://www.propublica.org/series/nurses> (California nurses LAT/ProPublica series)

Assignment (due December 17): Rewrite of enterprising feature

December 10:

Investigative medical journalism

Guest lecturer: Charles Ornstein, Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for Los Angeles Times, now at ProPublica

Readings: NYT endostatin

December 15 (note this is a Tuesday instead of Thursday)

Wrapup

The lessons of endostatin

Advice on the job search and freelancing

Suggested (not required) readings:

Cohn, Victor and Cope, Lewis. *News & Numbers: A Guide to Reporting Statistical Claims and Controversies in Health and Other Fields*. Iowa State University Press, August 2001 (second edition).

Blum, Deborah and Knudson, Mary. *A Field Guide for Science Writers*. Oxford University Press (August 2005).

Resources

Association of Health Care Journalists www.healthjournalism.org

Health News Review www.healthnewsreview.org

Other:

Every Tuesday, read and critique the medical and health stories in the *Science Times*. We will discuss your critiques briefly in class.

Grading:

Grades will be assigned based on class participation (20%), your participation in beat curation on Twitter (10%) and assignments (70%, as follows: 10% spot news for consumers, 10% spot news for professionals, 25% service piece, 25% enterprise story). Grades for late papers will be reduced by one-half a grade per 24 hours that it is late, starting as soon as it's due, so a B paper will receive a B- after one day of lateness, a C+ after two, etc. I will not grade any paper that is more than two weeks late. This policy will be altered only in the case of an extenuating circumstance discussed with me.

Noted improvement, rather than strict grades, will determine overall grade. You will be expected to attend all classes; up to one absence will be allowed with prior notice. Note that

class participation is 20% of your grade. That means it's important to speak up, and that if you miss more than one class, that 20% is going to suffer.