Science Writing - JOUR-GA1180001
Science, Health, and Environmental Reporting Program
Wednesdays, 5 - 8 p.m. Room 654, 20 Cooper Square

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Overview

One of the most brutal truths of science journalism is that no one needs to read your article. Scientists can learn about breaking science news from their professional journals and meetings; most members of the public don’t see science as integral to their lives; and the science-interested members of the public have more media choices available to them than ever. As you have already learned, to prosper as a science journalist, you need the knack of composing stories that forcefully grab readers and hang onto them all the way to the stunning last line. But to truly prosper as a professional, you will also need to be able to work with editors at every stage of the process, from pitching the story to rewriting as needed to signing off on final proofs (and sometimes beyond).

SHERP has already helped start you on developing the necessary skills. This course is your opportunity to pull all of them to a higher level. Much of the class will be geared toward writing a 3,500-word feature article of publishable quality, but other assignments will call on the abilities you will need in other forms of writing, including books, reviews and essays, as well as in media beyond the printed page. We’ll also emphasize how to market your work (and yourself) to top media outlets—an essential and underappreciated skill. In the process, you will be learning more about how to operate successfully as a professional journalist within a large, competitive, rapidly evolving field.

Course Structure

The first weeks of the course will review and sharpen what you have already learned about how to lay the groundwork for solid, saleable feature articles: how to come up with fresh story ideas, how to identify appropriate markets for them, how to map a strategy for producing the story on time, and so on. (One fundamental question we will often return to is, what makes an idea into a story?)

Throughout the course we will critically read published articles from a variety of sources and explore the genres, narrative structures and voices that features can employ
across diverse media. What can science writers learn from their colleagues working in very different areas of journalism (or even outside of journalism)? What are the pros and cons of writing about science for niche audiences rather than just mass audiences? Guest speakers will include top editors and writers representing a range of publications and points of view.

One of the keys to improving as a writer and progressing through a career is learning how to edit. You will therefore get practical experience with editing not just your own work but also that of your fellow students. Along the way you will learn the absurdly simple, absolutely critical, widely disregarded rules for getting along with editors—rules that can help make or break your career.

Discussion

Writing is lonely, isolated work, best pursued in a protective vacuum, safely away from the jarring influence of editing and criticism. —Ha, that joke never gets old. For professional journalists, feedback from editors and peers is indispensable. As a member of this class, you will be expected to actively participate in all discussions and exercises for the betterment of your own work and others. Come to class with opinions—and be prepared to defend them. Be generous in offering constructive criticism of others’ work, and be equally gracious about accepting others’ judgments of yours. Remember, as a journalist, listening and asking questions are fundamental to the job. I’ll expect you to do a lot of both, particularly when we are lucky enough to have veteran journalists as guest speakers. Take advantage of their experience and knowledge.

Assignments and Grading

The principal focus of your work throughout this course will be to propose, research and write a 3,500-word feature article on a timely, substantive topic. Later, after receiving editing comments, you will rewrite that feature. In addition, you will write and edit a variety of other assignments on a weekly basis. Overall, these written assignments will account for 75 percent of your class grade. The remaining 25 percent will be based on your classroom participation and discussion. I’m counting on you to bring your full critical, journalistic intelligence and enthusiasm to class—you’ll be enriching the experience for all of us!

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
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<tr>
<td>General participation</td>
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<td>News story post-mortems</td>
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<td>Pitch letter for feature</td>
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<td>Analysis of a feature’s structure</td>
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<td>Preliminary outline for feature</td>
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<td>Preliminary lede &amp; billboard</td>
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<td>Updated outline of feature</td>
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<td>Feature (1st version)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer edit of student’s feature</td>
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<td>Final revised feature</td>
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Schedule

All plans are subject to change.

Week 1: Wednesday, September 6

OVERVIEW: NEWS VS. FEATURES: EDITORS & WRITERS

Part 1: An introduction to the class, to professional science feature writing and to marketing your work appropriately. Brief review of the differences between news stories and features, and of some reliable, basic narrative structures that work in each form. What are shared challenges shared by news and features, what are challenges unique to each, and how do the defining characteristics of each relieve or compound the difficulties? Also, we will discuss what class members think they would most like to review or practice before embarking on their careers.

Part 2: How and why editors make assignments. What does an assigning editor need to tell a writer to get a good story? Conversely, what does a writer need to know from an editor to complete an assignment well? Which kinds of feedback from editors to writers are helpful? Which kinds are unhelpful, or even counterproductive? What is the difference between editing and rewriting?

Assignments for next week:

- **News story postmortems**: Choose two news stories you’ve written in the past—one that you think turned out well, one that is (at least in your eyes) unsatisfactory. Submit those stories to me (links are sufficient) along with written commentary about what works and what could stand improvement in each. In particular, tell me what you would do differently if you were now turning this story into a longer, more feature-length story: what would you explore in more depth; what would you include that you left out previously for reasons of space or deadlines, etc.

- Begin researching ideas for your feature story (you will discuss at least one in week 4 but you will need to have some well in hand for week 3).

Week 2: Wednesday, September 13

INTRODUCTION TO STRUCTURE & STORY

Part 1: Developing an effective structure for a story is one of the most fundamental ways—and perhaps the most reliable—to ensure it will be satisfying. We'll start by looking at some of the standard workhorse structures that science writers rely on, and we'll consider why they work. Then we'll step back and delve into some of the competing theories about what we mean by a story. What elements are essential? Why are stories good vehicles for conveying information? And how does all of this relate back to ideas about structure?

Part 2: More in depth on the practice and theory of story structural development. First, a brief review of ledes, billboards (a.k.a. nut grafs), transitions, kickers and other structural elements useful for telling your story forcefully. When do anecdotes, description and similar elements help to advance the narrative and when do they hurt it? Then: Why is story structure so fundamental to powerful storytelling,
whether in fiction or in journalism? How can the structure of a story—particularly in a longer narrative such as a feature or a book—improve on what the individual elements have to offer?

Assignments for next week:
- Prepare three story possibilities for your feature article.

Week 3: Wednesday, September 20

WRITING PITCHES THAT IMPROVE YOUR STORY

An appealing pitch letter is the seed from which nearly all great articles spring. But would you know one if you saw one? Can you write one that will convince an editor to love a story in your head as much as you do? We'll review what editors want and need to see in pitch letters for them to be successful as well as what small missteps can ruin an otherwise great pitch. Then... we'll practice those pitching skills.

Assignments for next week:
- Select one of your feature ideas for further development and revise it as seems appropriate, based on feedback you have received.
- Write a formal pitch letter for your feature, based on your own research to date and the feedback you received in class. Address it to a specific publication that seems like a plausible market for that story.
- Be ready to pitch at least one of your feature ideas orally in class next time.

Week 4: Wednesday, September 27

MAKE YOUR GOOD FEATURE GREAT

As a group, we will discuss your ideas for the feature article on which you will work on for most of the rest of the semester. Each student will briefly present his or her feature idea(s). Fellow students will offer reactions, critiques and suggestions that might strengthen your work.

Assignments for next week:
- Read (or finish reading) Atul Gawande's article "Letting Go" and be prepared to discuss how its structure doesn't just support the story but enriches it.
- Continue to research and report for your feature article.

Week 5: Wednesday, October 4

STRUCTURE & STORY IN ACTION (PART I)

Part 1: A continuation of the discussion of how good story structure is essential to vivid storytelling, especially in longer articles. Together, we'll analyze a complex narrative article (Gawande's "Letting Go") and discuss how its narrative structure helps make the story and strengthens the power of its themes.

Part 2: In-class exercise, TBA.

Assignments for next week:
- Continue to research and report for your feature article.
Choose a feature article of 3,000 or more words and write an analysis of it that reveals how the story's structure enabled and (ideally) enhanced its storytelling and message. Feel free to be critical of choices that the author made. There isn't a strict word count attached to this assignment but if you need one, call it ~1,000 words: give me enough detail to prove that you understand what the story and its structure are doing.

Week 6: Wednesday, October 11

Writing Leads That Capture Readers & Set Up a Story
The opening paragraphs of most stories are where the battles for readers' attention are typically won or lost. We'll look at examples of articles with great and awful openings and dissect out their successes and failures.

Assignments for next week:
- Continue to research and report for your feature article.
- Write a very preliminary outline for your feature article, based on your current sense of how it will likely come together as a story. (Don't worry, this isn't a binding contract on how your article will actually develop.)

Week 7: Wednesday, October 18 [Will Need to Reschedule]

Bringing Characters to Life
If you know how to create and bring to life memorable, engrossing characters in your stories, the dramatic power of your storytelling multiplies. That's as true in nonfiction as in fiction. One of the challenges of science writing, though, is that it often focuses on things, concepts, and processes more than on people. So can you turn those inanimate objects and abstractions into characters? And how good are you at capturing the reality of a living person in your prose? Let's find out. Also: Are you as the narrator of your story also a character in it, implicitly or explicitly? Should you be? What are the consequences of that choice?

NOTE: Because I'll need to be traveling for other work during this week, I'll reschedule this class or find another way to have this lesson with you.

Assignments for next week:
- Continue to research, report, and write for your feature article.
- Write a very preliminary version of what the beginning of your article might be. (Again, don't worry, you're free to change it as much as you like for the real final article.) Write enough of a lede that a reader could feel hooked into the article, and write a billboard/nut graf that sets up what the article will be about, if it's not already part of the preliminary lede. The challenge is to see if you can lure a reader into a long article and compellingly suggest what you're going to do with it—without ruining all the surprises.

Week 8: Wednesday, October 25

The View from the Other Side of the Desk
Tips on some of journalism’s essential skills from a panel of seasoned science-writing pros. How they grappled with difficult stories and found ways to tell stories that defied easy solutions.

**Assignments for next week:**
- Continue to research, report, and write for your feature article.
- Write an updated version of the structural outline for your article that reflects your latest understanding of how it's turning out. Include a revised version of the lede and billboard for your article, too, if you've had fresh inspirations on those.

**Week 9: Wednesday, November 1**

**TELLING STORIES OUTSIDE OF PRINT**
As you already know, the journalistic storytelling demands and opportunities of TV, radio and new media are distinctive. The group will discuss examples, good and bad, of how journalists have accommodated the needs of their media on specific stories, using examples provided by Rennie and students.

**Assignments for next week:**
- Continue to research, report, and write for your feature article. Getting near an endpoint!

**Week 10: Wednesday, November 8**

**STRUCTURE & STORY IN ACTION (PART II)**
Members of the class will discuss how the structure informs and enhances the message of selected published feature articles.

**Assignments for next week:**
- Complete a polished first draft your feature article.

**Week 11: Wednesday, November 15**

**THE BOOK LIFE AND OTHER CAREERS**
Writing and selling a book is not just quantitatively different from working on features or other shorter articles. In these two hours, the class will explore how successful book authors go about it; the pros and cons of working with agents; finding a publisher, and more. We’ll also consider other career options for those of you who may want to put your science writing and reporting skills to work in fields other than strict journalism, etc.

**Assignments for next week:**
- Peer edit the first draft of a classmate's feature article (we'll work out who edits whom ahead of time).
- While waiting for feedback on your feature, work on any revisions or further reporting that you know you want to make.

**Wednesday, November 23**
NO CLASS: THANKSGIVING!
(But please submit your peer edit before the holiday anyway!)
Week 12: Wednesday, November 29
ONE-ON-ONE MEETINGS [WILL SCHEDULE INDIVIDUALLY DURING CLASS TIME]
Rennie meets individually with students to discuss their features-in-progress.
Assignments for next week:
  • Working from the feedback you have had from Rennie and your peer editor, work on revising your feature article into its final form.

Week 13: Wednesday, December 6
FREELANCING, CONTRACTS, & THE MESSY LEGALITIES
Tips on freelance contracts and other legal matters.
Assignments for next week:
  • Complete your revised, final draft of your feature article.

Week 14: Wednesday, December 13
THE THRILLING CONCLUSION
A review of what we've learned in this semester and what (one hopes) is embodied in your feature articles, along with some final reflections on what you'll do next.
Assignments for next week:
  • Oh, please, just get out of here.

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