Current Topics in Science, Health and Environmental Journalism  (Fall 2011)  
G54.1017 – SHERP  

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

Overview  

This aim of this course is to introduce you to the world of science journalism in two important ways: by covering a beat, and by participating in case studies of science topics that are at the cutting edge of current research and have important implications for the way we live. In other words, they are the raw material for great journalism.  

As you immerse yourselves in 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 and blogging frequently for the SHERP webzine, Scienceline (www.scienceline.org). You’ll be covering a beat and will be following the peer-reviewed journals, blogs 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, beat blogging and investigative work, among other topics.  

In addition to learning the tools and practicing the techniques science journalists use to cover news, we will explore four topics as in-depth case studies, with distinguished visiting journalists and scientists as our guides. This semester, those four topics will be: daydreaming and addiction, mitochondrial disease, TBA and evolution in the city. In each case, you will do preparatory readings and in-class interviews, and will then will practice turning the information you’ve collected into engaging, accurate journalism.  

Beats  

Beat coverage is at the core of journalism, and of this class. We will follow a newsroom model, 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 and other publications. You will be blogging on your beat for Scienceline and will also write three beat-related stories.
On the first day of class, we’ll assign 14 beats in four clusters (the same four groupings you’ll see on the Scienceline site), based on a combination of your preferences and the needs of the class. My goal is for each of you to end up with a beat that interests you but that you don’t know much about. You’ll learn more that way. Here are the beats:

- Environment cluster: climate change/earth science, ecology/nature, energy, environmental health/pollution
- Health cluster: medical practice, prevention, psychology/neuroscience, drugs
- Life sciences cluster: biology/evolution, genetics, microbes
- Physical sciences cluster: technology, physics/chemistry/math, space

At the beginning of each class (except the first one), I’ll call on one or two of you at random to briefly update the rest of us on one piece of timely news you’ve found on your beat, and we’ll discuss how to turn that news into a solid piece of science journalism, either as a news story, a feature or a blog entry. To be ready to be called upon, you must follow your beat closely and continually. Everything you’ll need to read in order to do so, including Science and Nature, is available free in the SHERP common room, on the Web, or through databases you can access via NYU Home (you’ll learn all about these databases at library training Sept. 12).

Writing Assignments

There will be writing assignments in and out of class. In addition to writing about our case studies in class, you will write (and re-write!) four graded stories: a 500-word news story, a 450-word event story, a 600-word explainer and an 1,000-word feature. In addition, you will write a two-day beat blog stream (including at least one post in which you express and support an opinion) and one investigative blog post on your beat. Some of your work, if done well, will end up being published in Scienceline, the webzine you will be running for a year, starting at the end of November.

Except for the blog items, the topics of all of your stories, including your event story, must be cleared with me in advance.

All assignments for this class must 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. The blog items, in addition to being e-mailed to me, should also be e-mailed to the relevant Scienceline editor. If the editor approves your blog items it will be published quickly, since timeliness is especially important for blogging.

About story lengths: As a general rule, in your professional lives as journalists you should take assigned word limits seriously and wrote 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 1,000-word story, for instance, should be at least 900 (well chosen!) words and no longer than 1,100.

Assigned Readings and Discussion
You don’t need to buy any books for this class, but there will be readings for all of the case studies. I will post them all to the Google Docs and alert you via email. 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 have trouble with the in-class assignments 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. Most 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 nearly as important as the detailed feedback you will get from your peers and professors, but grades 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 beat news story, 10 percent
- 450-word event story, 5 percent
- Two-day beat blog stream, 5 percent
- 600-word beat explainer, 15 percent
- Investigative beat blog item, 5 percent
- 1,000-word beat story, 25 percent
- In-class contributions (case studies and discussion), 35 percent

For the assignments in which you’re doing multiple versions (all but the blogs and the event story), your grade will be the average of the grade you receive on the first version you turn in to me (the first revise, after peer editing) and your grade for the rewritten version (the second revise).

Deadlines

Coping with deadlines is one of the most valuable lessons you will learn in SHERP. In the world of professional journalism you will not be able to sustain a career if you blow deadlines. If you cannot 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. **Remember that unless I specify otherwise, all assignments are due via email to me as attached Word e-mail files by 10 a.m. on due date, except the event stories.**

You are welcome to turn in work early if you choose; I edit assignments in the order in which they’re turned in to me. Here are the assignments and due dates:

- 500-word beat story: ideas due Sept. 15; first draft due to peer editor Sept. 29; first revise due to Dan Oct. 3; second revise due to Dan Oct. 16.
• 600-word beat explainer piece: ideas due Oct. 13; first draft due to peer editor Oct. 27; first revise due to Dan Nov. 3; second revise due to Dan Nov. 17.
• 1,000-word beat feature story: ideas due Oct. 27, first draft due to peer editor Nov. 20, first revise due to Dan Nov. 27, second revise due to Dan Dec. 15.
• 450-word event story due to Dan anytime between Sept. 15 and Dec. 14 within two hours of the event’s completion. Note: This story does not have to be on your beat.
• Two-day beat blog stream, due dates to Dan will be assigned.
• Investigative beat blog item, due to Dan Dec. 1

Ethical Conduct

Your life as a professional journalist has now begun, which means that for the rest of your working life, your obligation is to be your own toughest critic by holding yourself to the highest standards of our profession. While you’re at NYU, your professors will also participate in holding you to those standards, which are outlined in the ethics pledge and the NYU Journalism Handbook for Students and are enforceable by sanctions that can range from a lowered grade to expulsion from SHERP. Keeping faith with your audience requires understanding what plagiarism means in a journalistic context, how and when to attribute information, and how to treat sources ethically. Read the pledge and the handbook carefully, and if you are ever in doubt about an ethics issue talk to a professor. The golden rule for ethical behavior is: When in doubt, seek counsel from someone who is more experienced and whose advice you value.

Scheduling and Attendance

The class will meet Thursdays from 10:00 to 4:30 in Room 653. (Don’t worry – we’ll take breaks, including lunch! We will also usually have Scienceline meetings with the previous SHERP class during lunch.) When class is scheduled, I expect you to attend. If there’s a good reason you must be absent, you need to let me know beforehand via e-mail or telephone.

Our schedule will be different on these days:
Sept. 22 and 23 – Brookhaven National Laboratory. The bus will depart from in front of 20 Cooper Square at 10 a.m. Thursday and return by 5 p.m. Friday.
Oct. 20 – No class, I’ll be at the Society of Environmental Journalists conference.
Oct. 27 – We’ll have a regular morning class, and then go to the New York Times for a tour and a pitching session. The Times building is at the corner of 43rd St. and Eighth Ave. Meet in the lobby at 1 p.m.
Nov. 24 – No class, Thanksgiving.

Contacting Me, Contacting You

I regularly check e-mail; contact me anytime at dan.fagin@nyu.edu. If you prefer good old-fashioned interpersonal communication (and who doesn’t?) you can call me at my home office (516-801-2477). In a pinch, you can try my cell phone (516-660-6383) but try the home office number first because, well, I hate my cell phone. Better still, you can always find me in my office in Room 712 on Wednesday afternoons and after class on Thursdays. The number there is 212-998-7971. It’s also very important that you give me your current e-mail address, and that you check your e-mail frequently in case I need to reach you.