Syllabus Fall 2013
Writing, Research and Reporting Workshop I – Science, Health and Environmental Reporting
JOUR-GA 1021.006

Instructor: Michael Balter, Adjunct Professor of Journalism
Times: Tuesdays 9:20 am to 3:20 pm from Sept 3 to Dec 10 plus special sessions
Location: Room 653 Carter Journalism Institute NYU

The aim of this course is to develop and enhance your journalistic talents through intensive use of the tools of the trade. We will specialize in science, health and environment writing and reporting, although the outlook and skills you will acquire will serve you on any of journalism’s numerous news beats.

You will learn to write and report compelling news stories and news features, and greatly improve your already existing skills. These will include basic elements of journalism such as how to find story leads, track down information sources, get and conduct interviews, write with clarity, accuracy and style, and make the most of the editing process. You will learn to write for the print and electronic media, practice the art of blogging, and have a brief introduction to podcasting. You will also receive a basic introduction to shooting and editing video in a series of morning and evening workshops.

In class, there will be a strong focus on discussion, newsroom-style give-and-take, and story pitches, as well as in-class exercises, group edit sessions and some guest speakers. This is a workshop, so class attendance is MANDATORY. You will put your new skills into practice with regular assignments. And some of your best work, honed by group and one-on-one editing sessions, will be considered for the SHERP webzine, Scienceline.

Assignments

There will be four key writing assignments. They will be the subject of intense editing workshops involving your fellow students and the instructor.

* A 300-400 word spot news story on a new scientific paper (you will write two drafts.)
* A 400-500 word spot news story on a policy, personnel, career or other topic (two drafts.)
* A 900 word news feature focusing on a science/health/environmental debate or controversy (basic science or policy, three drafts.)
* A 1000 word profile of a scientist, researcher, or policy person (two drafts.)

We will also conduct numerous written exercises in class, and you will be assigned weekly readings (and sometimes videos and podcasts) for class discussion.

These are in addition to the required reading and podcasts listed below.

PLEASE NOTE: This syllabus is subject to change at any time. While I will make every effort to ensure that you are aware of changes, ultimately it will be your responsibility to keep up with them. Any changes, as well as the specific reading and other assignments for each class, will be communicated to you by email, so please immediately read any messages you receive from me!
Preparing your assignments

All written assignments should be double spaced and submitted as Microsoft Word files, and in some cases I may require printed submissions as well. Please send them to me at michael.balter@gmail.com and be sure to include your name on all pages and the date and the total word count on the first page. Since your assignments will be the subject of editing workshops in class, you will also need to send them to the members of your editing group (to be named later.) The deadline for doing so will be the same as the deadline for sending them to me (see below.)

Please attach a list of your sources (both interviewees and other major online or written material you consulted) to each draft of your stories. Please do not exceed the assigned word length by more than 15% on the first draft of any story. I will let you know ahead of time how much leeway you are permitted on the final word count for each assignment.

Deadlines: Your work must be submitted on time. Late papers will be heavily penalized. Be sure to back up your work: Neither homework-eating dogs nor hard drive crashes will be acceptable excuses.

Plagiarism: I know I don’t have to say anything about this, except to remind you that the Journalism Institute’s ethics policies will be fully enforced in this class. If you are stuck on a story and feeling desperate, come talk to me. We have all been there. As for how and when—

Office hours and other consultations

I will hold office hours right after each Tuesday, from 3:30-5 pm, in an office on the 6th floor to be determined shortly. If you know ahead of time that you want to see me, consider making an appointment. If you need to talk to me at other times, please feel free to email or call me at any time, including weekends and holidays. If I am not available right away, you can leave a message. Telephonically I will be available by cell phone, (718) 751-6473, or on Skype, user name = michaelbalter, or by email, michael.balter@gmail.com.

Grading

Your grade will be based on your written and in-class performance, with a strong emphasis on improvement over the semester: The breakdown is as follows:

- First news story: 5%
- Second news story: 10%
- Controversy feature: 15%
- Profile: 20%
- Other exercises: 5%
- Video shoot: 20%
- Discussions: 25% (ie class participation)

Required and suggested reading

- You should get the most recent edition available of On Writing Well by William Zinsser, if you don’t already have it. We will make use of it in class at various times. You might also consider obtaining The Science Writers’ Handbook by Hayden and Nijhuis. (Kindle editions are fine.) And please refer to Dan’s syllabus and instructions concerning the AP Stylebook, which will also be the ruling guidelines in our class.
• I would like you to follow, on a daily basis as closely as possible, the Knight Science Journalism Tracker. This is compiled by veteran science writer Paul Raeburn and other contributors. It is a roundup of science news stories from newspaper, magazine and online sources, accompanied by occasionally cranky critical comments. You can subscribe by RSS or email subscription; we will have occasional discussions of what appears there.

• Each Tuesday morning before coming to class, be sure to take a look at the New York Times’ Science Times. You can read it online (meaning whenever in the morning you open your laptop) or in the print edition. We will discuss the stories that appear there on a regular basis.

• Please subscribe to the podcast of the Wisconsin Public Radio program To the Best of Our Knowledge. This is an excellent program that often delves deeply into scientific and related issues. We will often discuss topics that are raised there.

• Please closely follow the online news services of Science, Nature and other publications to be named later.

• Over the course of the semester we will be identifying interesting blogs and podcasts to follow. You are encouraged to bring your own suggestions to the attention of the class.

**Major deadlines**

Please make a careful note of all the deadlines given below at the beginning of the semester. Unless we decide to make changes or agree to extensions, these will be firm deadlines and not subject to negotiation, as indicated above.

**CLASS SCHEDULE (SUBJECT TO CHANGE)**

Please note that there will be no class on Oct 15, which is a university holiday; there will also be no class on Nov 26, the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. We will, however, make up part of the Nov 26 class on Friday morning Dec 6. And our last activity, the video follies, will take place during the morning of Dan’s class on Dec 12.

**SEPTEMBER 3: What is journalism? What is science, health and environmental journalism?**

We will start off with introductions and an overview of the course. We’ll discuss the nature of the journalism craft and why you want to make a career of it. What is the difference between a journalist and an educator or scientist who wants to communicate scientific findings and discoveries?

Where do journalists find their stories? What is the difference between a spot or breaking news story, a news feature, a narrative feature, and so forth? We will look at examples and analyze them.

We will discuss specific ways to come up with news story ideas and how you can be ready to pitch ideas during the next class.

What is the basic structure of a news story? Ledes, nut grafs, kickers, etc. The inverted pyramid—when to use it and when not to. We will do an in class exercise to get you working with this format.

**Assignment for Sept 10 class:** Skim recent issues of some major journals like Science, Nature, the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, the PLoS journals, the Journal of the American Medical Association, the New England Journal of Medicine, and others in your own scientific specialty or interest. Identify at least one paper that became a news story in the major media.
Assignment for Sept 10 class: Identify at least two ideas that might be candidates for your first, 300-400 word news story.

SEPTEMBER 10: What is news? Reporting and writing the story.

Our guest this morning will be David Corcoran, editor of the NYT Science Times. We will dissect this morning’s edition of Science Times and discuss with David the choices he made about what stories to run, what angles to follow, and any questions you wish to pose to him.

In the afternoon:

Discussion of news stories from journal papers. Which papers became news? Which ones should have? Which ones shouldn’t have?

Introduction to reporting: How do journalists get their information? What do they do when news breaks? Our discussion will include analysis of several news stories to see if we can follow in the reporter’s tracks.

Writing the story: We will do an exercise in class to get you ready to write your first news story. You will begin to apply what you have learned about news story structure.

Pitchfest! Discussion of candidate news stories for your first news story assignment.

Assignment due Sunday Sept. 15 at 6 pm: Write a 300-400 word news story, submitted to instructor and to the designated members of your editing group.


We will read, critique and discuss selected examples of your short news stories. What errors did you make, and how could they be better written and reported? What challenges or problems did you encounter in reporting and writing them? With this segment begins intense workshopping of your writing skills, which will continue throughout the semester. After this discussion, you will break into peer editing workshops to continue this process.

Afternoon: In-class exercises to sharpen your news writing and reporting skills.

Assignment due Sept. 20 11:59 pm: Second draft of your 300-400 news story due, submitted to instructor only.

Assignment due Monday Sept 23 at 8 pm: Identify two more news story ideas, on any subject other than a scientific paper, and email one short paragraph each to instructor. Be ready to pitch these ideas in class on Tuesday.

SEPTEMBER 24: Reporting and writing continued. News features.

More on finding and reporting news stories. Most stories are found by reporters, not editors. How to look for them, and how to pitch them. How much do you need to know before you pitch a story to an editor?
What editors like and don’t like, and how much you should care. Developing sources, what to read, how to deal with press releases and public relations people.

What is the real story? Is there a story behind the story? How to get it without alienating your best sources. The responsibilities of a science journalist. What is the relationship between science, business, politics, and the other subjects covered by the news media?

A brief reminder on reporting rules, a topic that will be covered in other classes: The news embargo, the Ingelfinger rule, and how to avoid breaking them while on tight deadlines.

We will discuss and analyze several news feature stories that will be assigned beforehand.

Pitchfest! You will present your ideas for the second news story in class.

**Assignment due Sunday Sept. 29 at 10 am:** Submit second news story to instructor and your editing group members.

**OCTOBER 1: The art of the interview.**

Interviewing: Great journalism requires great interviewing skills. How to make fast “cold” calls, how many sources and interviews are enough, how to know when you know enough (or whether you know what you think you know.) Asking the right questions, listening to the answers, asking follow-ups, getting the facts right. How to ask “stupid” questions and how to ask smart ones. The proper relationship between a reporter and a researcher, avoiding too much familiarity, understanding who researchers are and their motivations. How to get researchers to avoid jargon so you get good quotes and good information.

Using quotes: Once you have the interview, how do you make best use of what your subjects have said? When and how to use quotes in stories, when to paraphrase.

The interviewing segment will include both in class and outside of class exercises.

**Editing workshop:** We will break into peer editing groups to go over your second news story. This will be preceded by a short in-class discussion of how you did on this assignment.

**Assignment due Sunday Oct 6 at 10 am:** Second draft of your second news story, sent to instructor only.

**Assignment due Monday Oct. 21 at 8 pm:** Come up with two alternative ideas for your 900 word news feature, which will be about a debate or controversy. You should have been thinking about this for some weeks already (I will remind you at regular intervals), and it could spring from your reporting and writing experiences thus far in this or other SHERP classes. Write a one-paragraph pitch on each idea, and submit to instructor; be ready to verbally pitch your proposal in the Oct. 22 class.

**OCTOBER 8: Writing about controversies. Writing exercises and individual consultations.**

We will discuss how to report on and write about controversial subjects, from scientific disagreements to ethical issues to policy debates. Our discussion will be based on readings assigned beforehand, and again you are encouraged to bring your own examples to the attention of the class. We will also have our eyes
out for controversies and how reporters write about them in our readings over the entire course of the semester.

How can we write about controversies without taking sides? Can we be “objective”? How can we be fair? Are they the same thing? What does “fair and balanced” mean, or what should it mean? While we may want to have some abstract or theoretical discussion of these questions, our main focus will be on how to deal with them in our everyday reporting and writing.

The rest of the class time will be spent working on a writing exercise to be assigned, and one-on-one consultations to evaluate your progress and any problems you are having up to this time.

OCTOBER 15: UNIVERSITY HOLIDAY, NO CLASS!

OCTOBER 22: Controversy feature: The pitchfest.

Pitchfest! You will briefly present your controversy feature story ideas to the class for our judgments on their worthiness. Pitch the one you prefer to do first, and keep the second in reserve in case there are problems with the first one. Be prepared to explain why your idea is worth doing and who would be interested in reading it, at least some of the sources you would contact for the story, what angle you want to pursue, and how you will make sure your story is fair.

Blogging: You will write a short blog post on a current controversy, details to be determined at the time of class. Due in class at 2:30 pm.

Assignment due Saturday Nov 9 at 10 am: First draft of your controversy feature due. Please submit to instructor and designated members of your editing group.

OCTOBER 29: Reporting intensive. On writing well and on writing online.

The first half of this class will be devoted to more advanced reporting and interviewing techniques, focusing on specific examples of problems and situations that have come up so far in your work on your controversy stories. You will be encouraged to discuss your progress on that assignment with the group and give each other advice.

News writing is not literature, but there is still plenty of room for good writing even in a small space. Writing compelling leads, more on what to include and what to leave out, more on what’s a good quote and what’s not. This session will be based in part on assigned readings of good (and a few bad) news stories, but you are encouraged to bring in your own examples. We will take a very close look at some excellently written news features and try to understand how they got that way—and how we can do it too.

Afternoon: Writing for online publications and the Web. How it differs from print formats. Our guest will be David Grimm, online editor for Science.

NOVEMBER 5: Social media, using the Web. Introduction to podcasting.

How and why social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, are important to journalists and how they can make the most of them. How journalists can harness the power of the Web.
Guest speaker: Adam Glenn, City University of New York.

This class will include a short introduction to podcasting and how it can enhance both your print and online stories. We will listen to and critique several podcasts assigned beforehand.

We will again discuss the progress of your controversy features, trying to identify last minute problems before you submit your first drafts Saturday morning.

NOVEMBER 12: Controversy feature editing workshop.

As usual, you will be divided into editing groups. You will spend as much time as necessary critiquing each others’ stories, looking for ways to perfect them for the second draft. I will be circulating and constantly available for consultation, either with the groups as a whole or individually during breaks. After this session, we will reconvene for a class discussion about this assignment.

Assignment due Sunday Nov 176 pm: Second draft of your controversy feature due. Submit to instructor only.

The rest of this class will be devoted to in-class writing exercises designed to stretch your imagination and writing style; we will discuss the results before adjourning for the day.

NOVEMBER 19: Individual editing sessions.

The class will not meet as a group this week. Instead, I will make 30 minute appointments with each of you, beginning early in the morning and going into the evening as necessary, to discuss the second draft of your controversy feature story and prepare you for completing the third and final draft. Details of how to sign up for specific time slots will be announced closer to the time.

Assignment due Sat Nov. 23 at noon: Third and final draft of your controversy feature.

Assignment due Dec 2 at 7 pm: This will be the final deadline for submitting a one or two paragraph proposal to instructor for your profile subject. We will have regular discussions and reminders about this assignment during the semester to be sure you are ready, and you are encouraged to pick your profile subject earlier in the semester (and to prepare you proposal) to be sure that he or she will be willing and available. I will approve profile subjects in advance and you can get started on them at any time.

DECEMBER 3: Writing the profile.

In the morning we will have a joint class with Dan Fagin and the 31s, and our guest will be Dan Kahan, a professor of psychology and law at Yale University. Kahan is an expert in science communication and one of the top researchers trying to understand climate change denialism.

Afterwards we will talk about profiles:
Profiling a scientist or policy person involved in science, health, the environment, or related areas is an opportunity to bring together all the skills you have developed so far—writing, reporting, interviewing, etc.—to bring such an individual to life for your readers. Using profile examples that I will assign ahead of time, we will discuss in detail how to do this.

Profiles on parade. You will present your profile candidates to the class and argue why they make good subjects, even though I will have approved your subject ahead of time. We will discuss the specific challenges and opportunities of each idea and give each other advice about how to write these stories.

Assignment due Sat Dec 76 pm: First draft of your profile. Please submit your draft to instructor and to the designated members of your editing group.

DECEMBER 6: Thanksgiving makeup class.

(Please note that this class will meet on a Friday morning, from 9:30 am to 12:30 pm only.)

We will have a final discussion of your profiles, discuss any problems or questions, and try to get you ready to file the first draft due on Saturday evening Dec 7. Other activities to be announced.

DECEMBER 10: Profile editing workshop.

We will break into editing groups and critique your profiles, in the usual fashion.

The morning after, dealing with the fallout: How to handle criticisms of your stories once they appear, from sources, readers, and others. Doing followup stories, staying on top of the story, staying in touch with your sources. What to do when a story needs a correction and how to prevent it happening. Promoting your published work on the Web via social media, links etc.

Finally, we will briefly review our progress over the semester and try to tie up some loose ends. We will talk about the future of journalism and your own futures: Do you still want to be science/health/environmental journalists? Of course you do.

Assignment due Dec 14 at 10 pm: Final draft of your profile.

DECEMBER 12: Video follies with popcorn (during the morning of Dan’s final class.)

We will view your videos for our edification and amusement, providing sharp but constructive critiques. You will provide the videos, and I will provide the popcorn.