

Syllabus
Writing and Reporting Workshop 1 – Science, Health and Environment Reporting
G54.1021

Instructor: [Michael Balter](#), Adjunct Professor of Journalism
Times: Tuesdays 10 am to 3 pm from Sept 7 to Dec 7 plus special sessions
Location: Room 654 Carter Journalism Institute NYU

The aim of this course is to turn you into a journalist, by introducing you to the basic tools of the trade. We will specialize in science, health and environment reporting, although the outlook and skills you will acquire will serve you on any of journalism's numerous news beats..

You will learn the ingredients of compelling news stories and news features, along with basic techniques of journalism such as how to find story leads, track down information sources, get 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 be introduced to podcasting. You will also receive a basic introduction to shooting and editing video in a series of 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 assignments, 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 varied weekly 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 major writing assignments. The last three will be the subject of intense editing workshops involving your fellow students and the instructor.

- A 300-400 word spot news story (you will write two drafts.)
- A 600 word news feature (two drafts.)
- A 800 word news feature focusing on a science/health/environmental debate or controversy (basic science or policy, three drafts.)
- A 900 word profile of a scientist, researcher, or policy person (two drafts.) This will be the same person you interview for the video workshop.

We will also conduct a number of written exercises in class, and you will be assigned weekly readings for discussion in class. I will post these readings on the class Google Groups page, [SHERP 29—Workshop on Reporting and Writing 1](#), which you will be invited to join; I will also alert you about them directly by email. These are in addition to the required reading listed below.

PLEASE NOTE: This syllabus is subject to change at any time. While I will make every effort to insure that you are aware of changes, ultimately it will be your responsibility to consult the Google Group, and the emails I send you, to keep up with them.

Preparing your assignments

All written assignments should be double spaced and submitted as Microsoft Word .doc files (not .docx), and in some cases I will 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 the first page. In the case of the last three assignments, which 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 online or written material you consulted) to each draft of your stories. Please do not exceed the assigned word length by more than 10% on the first draft of any story. Second drafts should not exceed the assigned word length.

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 class each Tuesday, from 3-5 pm, in an office on the 7th floor to be determined later. 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, (310) 594-5174, 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:

- Spot news story: 5%
- News feature I: 10%
- News feature II: 15%
- Profile: 20%
- Blogging: 10%
- Video shoot: 15%
- Discussions: 25% (ie class participation)

Required and suggested reading

- Dan Fagin has already asked you to obtain three books for the semester: the 2010 AP Stylebook, A Field Guide for Science Writers by Blum et al., and On Writing Well by Zinsser. We will make use of all three in class at various times.
- 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 Charles Petit and other contributors. It is a roundup of science news stories from newspaper, magazine and online sources, often accompanied by cranky and amusing comments from Charles and his colleagues. You can subscribe by RSS or email subscription.

- Each Tuesday morning before coming to class, be sure to take at least a brief look at the *New York Times*' [Science Times](#). We will discuss the stories that appear there on a regular basis. (same thing here)
- 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 and post them on the Google Groups page.

Major deadlines

Please make a careful note of all the deadlines given below at the beginning of the semester. These are firm deadlines and not subject to negotiation, as indicated above.

CLASS SCHEDULE (SUBJECT TO CHANGE)

SEPTEMBER 7: 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 craft you are entering into, and why you want to do 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 some in class exercises to get you working with this format.

Assignment for Sept 14 class: Skim some major journals like *Science*, *Nature*, the *PLoS journals*, the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, the *New England Journal of Medicine*, and others in your own scientific speciality or interest. Identify two papers that might be newsworthy; identify at least one additional paper that did indeed become a news story in the major media.

Assignment for Sept 14 class: Identify at least two ideas that might be candidates for your first, 300-400 word news story.

SEPTEMBER 14: What is news? Reporting and writing the story.

What do readers want to know, and what do we want them to know—and why? What's the difference between a compelling news story and a boring one?

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

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

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 some exercises in class to get you ready to prepare your first news stories, including rewriting ledes and covering some in-class breaking news. You will begin to apply what you have learned about news story structure.

Assignment due Monday Sept. 20 at 4 pm: Write a 300-400 word news story, submitted to instructor only..

SEPTEMBER 14 3:30 pm: Online databases orientation with Kara Whatley, Bobst PC Lab 1.

SEPTEMBER 21: Writing and reporting the story. The news blog.

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.

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.

Blogging: What is (or should be) the difference between a blog post and a spot news or news feature? Who reads them and why are they worth doing? We will discuss and analyze some of the blogs you have been reading.

Assignment due Sept. 26 11:59 pm: Second draft of your 300-400 news story due, submitted to instructor only.

Assignment due Sept 27 6 pm: Come up with two alternative ideas for your 600 word news feature. Write a one-paragraph pitch for each idea, and submit to instructor; and be ready to verbally pitch your proposal in the Sept. 28 class.

SEPTEMBER 22: 5:30 to 8:30 pm, video training with Adrian Mihai, Room 653. Be sure to bring a 4 GB SD card to the session.

SEPTEMBER 28: Reporting and writing the news feature.

Reporting skills continued: 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. Then:

Pitchfest! You will *briefly* present your news feature story ideas to the class for our judgments on their worthiness. 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, and what angle you want to pursue.

Assignment due Oct. 15 at 10 pm: Write a 600 word news feature

Assignments due Oct. 5 at 10 am: Identify your subject for video and written profile; make some progress on your news feature, including at least one interview, so you have some progress to discuss.

SEPTEMBER 29: 5:30 pm to 8:30 pm, Adrian's Final Cut introduction, Room 653.

OCTOBER 5: The art of the interview. Feature story progress report.

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.

News feature progress report: This will be a group discussion, we will try to identify problems and obstacles early on and make suggestions for getting past them. I will expect you to have at least identified several interview possibilities and other sources of information and be ready to tell us about them.

Profiles: We will have a short session in which you tell the class who your candidate profile subjects are and we discuss the focus and feasibility of your choices.

OCTOBER 5: 6:35 to 8:15 pm, video session with Emily Hager, Room 653.

OCTOBER 12: On writing well and on writing online.

News writing is not literature, but there is still plenty of room for good writing even in a small space. Writing compelling ledes, 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.

Writing for online publications and the Web. How it differs from print formats. We will take a look at several online publications assigned beforehand and the various approaches they take to news writing (compare, eg, *Science*, *Nature*, *National Geographic* and *Discover* in this regard.)

Exercise: You will write a short blog in class on a subject to be determined. **Due end of class, 3 pm.**

OCTOBER 15: Reminder, 600 word news feature due at 10 pm! Send to instructor and members of your editing group to be assigned beforehand.

OCTOBER 19: News feature editing workshop.

For this class you will be divided into four editing groups of four colleagues each. You will spend as much time as necessary critiquing each others' stories, looking for ways to perfect them for the second and final draft. I will be circulating and constantly available for consultation, either with the groups as a whole or individually during breaks. At the end of the group editing sessions, we will reconvene for a class discussion about this assignment.

Assignment due Oct. 25 at 6 pm: Come up with two alternative ideas for your 800 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. Write a one-paragraph pitch on each idea, and submit to instructor; be ready to verbally pitch your proposal in the Oct. 26 class.

Assignment due Oct. 26 at 10 am: Second draft of your 600 word news feature, submitted to instructor only.

OCTOBER 19: 6:35 TO 9:15 pm, video session with Emily Hager, Room 653.

OCTOBER 26: Writing about controversies. More blogging.

This class will focus on 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.

Pitchfest! You will *briefly* present your feature story ideas to the class for our judgements on their worthiness. 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. **Due at end of class 3 pm**

Assignment due Nov. 12 at 10 pm: 800 word news feature on a controversial subject. This will be submitted to the instructor and to your editing group members, to be assigned beforehand.

OCTOBER 26: 6:35 to 9:15 pm, video session with Emily Hager, Room 653.

NOVEMBER 2: 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.

NOVEMBER 5-9: NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCIENCE WRITERS MEETING IN NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT. Class attendance at this meeting to be determined.

NOVEMBER 9: To be determined.

The content of this class will depend upon whether or not we are able to attend at least some sessions of the NASW meeting in New Haven. If so, we will not meet on Tuesday, but will plan a short session in New Haven to discuss the meeting and what we are learning there.

NOVEMBER 12: Reminder, the first draft of your 800 word news feature on a controversial topic is due at 10 pm.

NOVEMBER 16: News feature editing workshop. Profiles.

For this class you will be divided into four editing groups of four colleagues each. 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.

Profiles: Based on readings that will be assigned beforehand, and what you have learned already about your profile subjects, we will discuss this assignment and how to bring your profile subject alive for readers.

Assignment: Second draft of news **due Nov. 21 at 6 pm.**

NOVEMBER 16: 6:35 to 8:15 pm, video session with Emily Hager, final touches, Room 653.

NOVEMBER 23: 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 news 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: Third and final draft of second news feature due. **Nov. 25 at 11:59 pm.**

Assignment: First draft of profile due **Nov 28 at 6 pm.** To be submitted to the instructor and the members of your editing group, as assigned beforehand.

NOVEMBER 30: Profile editing workshop. The morning after.

For this class you will be divided into four editing groups of four colleagues each. You will spend as much time as necessary critiquing each others' profiles, looking for ways to perfect them for the second and final draft. I will be circulating and constantly available for consultation, either with the groups as a whole or individually during breaks.

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.

Assignment: Final draft of profile due **Dec. 8 at 11:59 pm.**

DECEMBER 7: -30-

In this class we will review our progress over the semester, try to tie up some loose ends, and perhaps discuss a surprise topic or two. 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.