

WRITING AND REPORTING WORKSHOP II
(SHERP II)
Science, Health and Environmental Reporting Program
Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute
New York University
Spring Semester 2011
Tuesdays, 10 a.m.--3:15 pm, Room 654
plus four Tuesday evenings of video instruction

Professor: Stephen S. Hall
Home phone: (718) 287-7783
Cell phone: (718) 928-8440
E-mail: ssh251@nyu.edu or hallini@aol.com

Professor Bijal Trivedi, Bench Press
Home: (202) 232-5416
Cell: (202) 494-0681
E-mail: bijal_trivedi@mac.com

Video Instructor: Emily B. Hager
Phone: (860) 798-3274
E-mail: emilybhager@gmail.com

Overview: The Sherp II course will continue to develop writing, reporting and thinking skills that are necessary to understand, analyze, and communicate new developments in science and technology.

Students will be responsible for five specific assignments, including: a short exercise in explanatory prose (which may be usable as an “Ever Wondered” entry in Scienceline); a 1200-word reported essay that expands on a topical story or trend while exploring the use of authorial voice; a short three-to-four-minute video presentation (with Emily Hager); a 1200-word “Bench Press” news feature based on lab observation (with Bijal Trivedi); and a 750-1000 word “overture” plus detailed outline for a proposed book project.

In addition to these more formal assignments, we will experiment with a number of in-class writing and reading exercises, including Metaphornomics (in which we develop extended metaphors on assigned science-related topics), SciPo (quick poetry exercises, some with a specific scientific theme), Instant OpEds (quick blog-like takes on recent scientific news), Character Sketches (quick, one-paragraph physical and psychological descriptions of people), and close textual (“Ray-Ray”) analysis of news and feature ledes to improve both writing and analytical reading skills. Most classes will also reserve time for an informal “story meeting,” where students will pitch story ideas; this will culminate, by the end of the semester, with a formal query letter about a specific story idea, pitched to a specific media outlet. In addition, we’ll reserve time for group discussions of works in progress, with special attention to unique problems that arise and approaches to problem-solving in both reporting and writing.

Class Structure: This class has a complicated structure, as there are two co-teachers (see the two auxiliary syllabi for more information).

Bijal Trivedi will shepherd you through your Bench Press assignment. Embedded in an NYU science laboratory, you'll have liberal access to investigators and their research. Start spending time at your lab early in the semester. Ultimately you'll write a news feature (a 1,200-word hybrid that's more "feature-y" than a straight news story) on research taking place in your lab and others like it around the world. In Week 4, you'll participate in a "pitch slam," where your query for the news feature will receive a collegial critiquing.

Emily Hager will direct the video segment. Continuing her coaching from last semester, she will address the intricacies of shooting, lighting, b-roll, production plans, story outlines, narration, and editing. You'll make a 3- to 4-minute video, which will "premiere" at our annual film festival. In making the video, think about applying the principles of storytelling to a different medium.

There are five major assignments:

- * **Explanatory Passage.** 500 words.
- * **Video.** (Led by Emily Hager) Three to four minutes.
- * **Reported essay.** 800-1,200 words.
- * **Bench Press news feature.** (Led by Bijal Trivedi) 1,200 words.
- * **Overture/Book proposal.** 750-1,000 word overture plus chapter outline.

Subjects and Sourcing: All work should be on scientific topics (in rare cases, exceptions can be made). The work you produce for this class should be based on information gleaned from multiple sources (minimum of 3 people for the reported essay, and 5 people for the book proposal), and must feature well-placed, spicy quotes. While the reported essay may, by its nature, need to be exclusively phone-reported, it is essential that you go into the world to interview and observe real people for your Bench Press news feature and (obviously) your video.

Deadlines and Submissions: Please submit all assignments as Microsoft Word (.doc files) documents; be sure to include your name. Assignments should be turned in via e-mail to me at ssh251@nyu.edu. Deadlines are not "suggestions"; missing a deadline is a serious infraction.

A Word on Plagiarism, Literal and Figurative: Plagiarism is the journalistic sin for which there is no forgiveness. There is no excuse for even inadvertent appropriation of someone else's words, phraseology, ideas, or work product. Do not cut ethical corners: This includes other kinds of reporting and writing errors that have the effect of misleading your sources or your readers. If you have the slightest doubt about the right way to handle a situation with a source, or the least bit of uncertainty about how much attribution is necessary as you are writing, please bring it to my attention or, even better, bring it up in class, so we can collectively discuss the problem and "workshop" a solution that might benefit everyone. If you have any questions about proper journalistic ethics, please consult the Carter Institute's ethics handbook, which is readily available and searchable at <http://journalism.nyu.edu/resources/ethics>. As you should know, ethical violations can incur sanctions ranging from failing grades to permanent separation from the program.

GRADING

Explanatory Passage: 10 percent

Reported essay: 15 percent

Video: 20 percent

Bench Press news feature: 20 percent

Book proposal/outline: 15 percent

Class participation, peer edits, and writing exercises: 20 percent

Note that showing up and throwing yourself into discussions and the writing exercises counts for a significant percentage of your grade .

Class Rhythm: Classes will meet every Tuesday from 10 a.m. until 3:15 pm; in advance of each class, readings will be distributed via e-mail in the form of PDFs and/or links. Class segments will include mini-lectures; group discussions of story ideas and stories in progress; in-class writing calisthenics; workshopping of pieces; and visits by guest writers and editors. Given the length of class sessions, we'll take semi-regular breaks, including "working lunches" as you do in-class exercises; and we won't necessarily use all the time every week.

The breakdown of weekly topics, assignments, readings, and guests is as follows. A cautionary note: many of our invited guests are working journalists, and their availability can change at the last minute. Be prepared for both pleasant and sometimes unpleasant surprises.

COURSE SUMMARY

WEEK 1 (January 25):

READING, WRITING, AND THINKING ABOUT SCIENCE: A fresh introduction to the tools for good science writing, with an emphasis on close textual reading, fluid writing, and critical thinking. We will discuss Peter Medawar's seminal essay, "Science and Literature"; deconstruct a paragraph written by Lewis Thomas; learn the basics of close textual ("Ray-Ray") analysis; and do our first "Instant OpEd" exercise in class. Bijal Trivedi will join us to explain the Bench Press assignment and answer any questions.

Readings for Week 1: P. Medawar, "Science and Literature"; L. Thomas, "Antaeus in Manhattan"; T. Schofield, "I Knew I Wanted To Be a Scientist When..."

Assignment for Week 2: Write a 300-500 word explanatory passage where you describe a complicated scientific or technical process (anaphylactic shock, Autophone, fear in the brain, quasars) in simple, everyday language that non-experts can understand. Also come to class prepared with two "notions": an unformed but promising kernel of a story idea. (Note deadlines below).

Readings for Week 2: *PNAS* paper on Vesuvius; Hall, Vesuvius proposal; C. Sloan, Nasca proposal; Hall, Vesuvius article; Hall, Nasca article; J. Scieszka, excerpts from “Science Verse”; and a sampler of explanatory passages that I’ll circulate a day or two before class.

Due (Jan. 28, 11:59 p.m.): Explanatory Passage

Due (bring to Feb. 1 class): Pitch #1--Two “notions” for a reported essay.

WEEK 2 (FEB. 1):

MINING THE LITERATURE (AND FINDING IDEAS): We will talk about finding interesting story ideas in the literature, and how to shape these ideas into an proposal. We will discuss the progression of several ideas from proposal to full-fledged stories, and how to think about crafting a pitch for your Bench Press story. We’ll also discuss several of the explanatory passages, do a quick round robin of notions, and do our first science-poetry exercise.

NOTE: 6:15-8:15 p.m., Emily Hager, video session 1 (see video syllabus).

Guest: Jon Scieszka, author of *Science Verse*, *Math Curse*, *The Stinky Cheese Man*, and other children’s book with a scientific theme.

Assignment for Week 3: Come to class with a “working hypothesis” for your reported essay assignment.

Readings for Week 3 (Feb. 8): P. Medawar, “Intuition and Induction in Scientific Reasoning”; J. Gillis, excerpts from “Temperature Rising” series (*New York Times*)

WEEK 3 (FEB. 8):

FROM PITCH TO HYPOTHESIS: When you start reporting a story, you must have a working hypothesis of what you think the story will turn out to be. We’ll discuss how “pre-reporting” your story will help you develop your hypothesis, and what you should do when the subsequent reporting fails to confirm it. We’ll take some time to discuss everyone’s working hypothesis for the reported essay, and we’ll also do our first in-class Metaphornomics piece.

Guest: Erica Goode, former editor, “Science Times” and environmental reporting team, *New York Times*, and Justin Gillis, *New York Times*.

Assignment for Week 4: Pitch #2--Complete a polished pitch for your Bench Press feature and bring it to class, where you will read it and the class will critique; Bijal will also be on hand.

Readings for Week 4: B. Carey, *Week in Review* pieces and H.M. obit

WEEK 4 (FEB. 15):

PITCH SLAM: Students will present their Bench Press pitches to classmates and instructors for group discussion. Bijal Trivedi will join us to critique and improve the proposals. We’ll also get progress reports on the reported essay assignment, introduce some of the parameters of a book project, and do an in-class workshop exercise analyzing and deconstructing some sample ledes.

Guest: Benedict Carey, neuroscience correspondent, *New York Times*

Assignment for Week 5: Reported Essay, first draft (due Feb. 18, 11:59 pm).

Readings for Week 5: R. J. Ray and A. Ray, excerpt from *The Art of Reading: A Handbook on Writing*; K. Vonnegut essay on voice; examples of voice in reported essays, including S. Begley on cancer research and C. Casey on ugly varmints.

WEEK 5 (FEB. 22):

THE WRITER'S VOICE: What creates tone and voice? We'll discuss examples of writers who use style, humor, hyperbole, poetic license and other rhetorical tricks to create their voice as they make an argument, which will be useful to bear in mind as you revise your reported essay (which is due Feb. 25). We will do two in-class exercises: an editing workshop on your reported essay and analyzing a second set of ledes.

NOTE: 6:15 - 9:15 p.m. Emily Hager, video session 2 (see video syllabus).

DUE (Feb. 18, 11:59 p.m.): Reported Essay, first draft.

Guest: Constance Casey, *Slate* correspondent (invited) or Thomas Murray, president, The Hastings Center.

Readings for Week 6: D. Overbye, Sam Ting profile; D. Overbye, excerpt, *Lonely Hearts of the Cosmos*; readings on sentence construction; excerpts of J. Austen, E. Hemingway, M. Karr, and D. Foster Wallace.

Assignment for Week 6 (due Feb. 25, 11:59 p.m.): Revision of your reported essay.

WEEK 6 (MARCH 1):

SENTENCES: We'll focus on the construction of good sentences, especially in the prime real estate of every story: the lede. In addition, we'll discuss a selection of your revised reported essays. In class exercises: Character Sketch I and the first part of an exercise in imitating a writer's voice. Dennis Overbye will help us think about both reported essays and book-length projects.

Guest: Dennis Overbye, astrophysics correspondent, *New York Times*.

Assignments for Week 7 (due March 4): First draft of Bench Press feature (due March 4, 11:59 p.m.) and Pitch # 3--for this pitch, please come to class with at least two possible "notions" for a book-length project).

Readings for Week 7: Paragraph readings.

WEEK 7 (MARCH 8):

PARAGRAPHS: We'll focus on the architecture of a good paragraph, how to construct them and how to connect them. In addition, we'll discuss some of the issues that came up while writing your Bench Press pieces and, in advance of the spring break, workshop your book ideas

with the thought of settling on and reporting a book project and overture. In-class exercises will include an Instant OpEd and another lede analysis session.

NOTE: 6:15-9:15 p.m., Emily Hager, video session 3 (see video syllabus).

DUE: First draft of Bench Press feature (due March 4, 11:59 p.m.) and Pitch #3 (bring to class).

Guest: TBD.

Readings Over Break for Week 8 (March 22): M. Gladwell, Susan Love story; J. Avorn, excerpt, *Powerful Medicines*; D. Grady, recent HRT story.

MARCH 14-20: SPRING BREAK!

WEEK 8 (MARCH 22):

“ANGLES” AND HUMILITY: Editors always want pieces to have an “angle” and a take, but how can you be sure your take is right? We’ll go through the cautionary lesson of stories about hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and its relationship to breast cancer by analyzing the way the story has gone back and forth over the last decade. Bijal Trivedi will also join us for a discussion of the first drafts of your Bench Press features.

Guest: Denise Grady, medical correspondent, *New York Times* (invited)

Readings for Week 9 (March 29): R. Bazell, excerpt, *Her-2*; M. Pollan, “Power Steer”; N. Angier, prologue, *Natural Obsessions*.

Assignment for Week 9: Video rough cut.

WEEK 9 (MARCH 29):

CREATING AN OVERTURE/IMAGINING AN ARC: For longer format pieces (including, obviously, a book project), the writer must be able to conceptualize a long-format narrative structure as well as an introductory precis (or overture) that, like a classical music composition, hints at themes and stakes out thematic territory that will be more fully explored and developed in the ensuing project. As we begin formally to commit book ideas to specific story lines and organizational outlines, we’ll discuss the elements of an overture (either book or magazine) by deconstructing Pollan’s “Power Steer” piece and then discuss the elements of a book outline. In-class exercises will include an “overture workshop” and an Instant OpEd.

DUE: Video rough cut.

Guest: Robert Bazell, chief science correspondent, NBC News, author of *Her-2*.

Assignments for Week 10 (April 5): Final cut of video, and Pitch # 4 (which should be about a news feature that you will ultimately pitch to a publication).

Readings for Week 10: D. Frey, “George Divoky’s Planet”; N. Dawidoff, “The Civil Heretic”; K. Brower, “The Danger of Cosmic Genius.”

WEEK 10 (APRIL 5):

SECTIONS (OR HOW LENGTH DETERMINES THE WAY YOU TELL THE STORY):

Using Darcy Frey's long magazine piece, "George Divoky's Planet," we'll discuss the way length affects narrative strategies and choices, and why magazine pieces and books can tell different, more complicated stories than news pieces and shorter news features. Continuing the climate warming theme, we'll deconstruct two different takes on global warming skeptic Freeman Dyson. As an in-class exercise, we'll do another Metaphoronomics piece. We'll also have another "story meeting" to discuss Pitch #4.

DUE: Final cut of video, plus Pitch #4 (bring to class).

Guest: Alex Prud'homme, co-author (with Julia Child) of *My Life in France* and author of the forthcoming *The Ripple Effect* (on water).

Assignment for Week 11: Finish whatever needs to be done for the final, polished version of your video feature.

Readings for Week 11: Readings on revision; examples of edits.

WEEK 11 (APRIL 12):

THE ART OF REVISION: We'll focus on the organizational, textual, and, yes, psychological skills that will allow you to take a good, solid first draft to the next level. We'll discuss Pitch #4, which should evolve into your query letter. In-class exercises will include another SciPo writing assignment and an editing workshop where students will work on their revised version of the Bench Press feature.

NOTE: 6:15-9:30 p.m., Emily Hager, video session 4 (see video syllabus).

Assignment for Week 12: Revision of Bench Press feature (due April 15, 11:59 p.m.)

"Readings" for Week 12: View R. Dretzin, "Growing Up Online" and "Digital Nation."

WEEK 12 (APRIL 19):

FILM FESTIVAL: The class will be devoted to screening, and critiquing, everyone's video feature. Emily Hager will be on hand, in addition to a guest experienced in critically analyzing video presentations. We'll also discuss selected Bench Press revisions.

DUE (April 15, 11:59 p.m.): Bench Press revision.

Guest: Rachel Dretzin, filmmaker and documentarian, Frontline, producer/director, "Growing Up Online" and "Digital Nation"

Assignment for Week 13 (Due April 22, 11:59 p.m.): Prepare an "overture" (750-1000 words) plus a detailed chapter outline of a book proposal on the basis of an idea you've been developing over the course of the semester

Readings for Week 13: Examples of book proposals, good and bad.

WEEK 13 (APRIL 26):

THE ART OF THE BOOK: We'll talk about what makes for a successful book proposal in terms of the central argument, the narrative story line, and what the subject matter can deliver to readers, either in terms of counterintuitive interpretation or riveting story. We'll discuss some of the book overtures, and talk about ways to stake claims for big ideas and advertise their importance in a proposal.

DUE (April 22): Overture and book outline.

Guest: Eamon Dolan, associate editor, Penguin Books.

Assignment for Week 14: For your final pitch assignment (#4, 2.0), please prepare and submit a sample query letter (two pages single-space maximum) that outlines your proposed news feature; as an alternative, you may also pitch a part of your proposed book project as a shorter, self-contained piece. Have a specific outlet or venue in mind, and tailor the pitch to that outlet.

Readings for Week 14: G. Vasari, excerpt, *Lives of the Artists*; sampler of query letters.

WEEK 14 (MAY 3):

FINAL THOUGHTS: We'll discuss your query letters and have a concluding discussion about the distinction between science writing, science journalism, and being a writer who happens to write about science--and why such work, whether in print or on-line, is such an important calling in the 21st Century.

DUE (April 29): Query Letter.