

*This is a generic version of the actual syllabus available the first day of class or shortly before*

## Environmental Reporting -- G54.1188 (SHERP)

Instructor: Dan Fagin

Associate Professor of Journalism

Director, NYU Science, Health and Environmental Reporting Program

### Overview

This aim of this advanced course is to teach you to produce sophisticated stories on environmental topics. We'll spend time in this class getting grounded in the basics of environmental science and environmental issues, and then you'll put that knowledge to work in your journalism. By the time we're done, you should be able to smoothly incorporate all of the important elements of an environmental story – data analysis, expert opinion, “real people” impact, and descriptive writing – into a finished product that's good enough to be accepted by a major publication. This course is open only to SHERP students, although I may make exceptions in the unusual circumstance that space is available.

We will begin the semester by going over the basics of environmental law, followed by units on investigative environmental reporting, nature writing, climate change, energy issues, communicating risk, toxicology, epidemiology, advocacy journalism, and dealing with spin. There will be frequent guest speakers from the worlds of environmental journalism and environmental science.

### Writing Assignments

This is not a “writing class” per se, but writing is the most important thing you will do at SHERP and this class is no exception. You will write two news stories, a longer feature, two article critiques and a short essay. We will have three “story meetings” and three peer-editing sessions. If all goes well, your work will be featured on Scienceline and in some cases may be commercially published.

It's important that you type all of your assignments; don't hand-write them. All assignments should be written in Microsoft Word (.doc files), so I can edit them and send them back with comments. If you need to 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, e-mail all of your assignments as attached files to dan.fagin@nyu.edu.

### Reading and Critiques

You are not required to buy any books for this course, but I will assign readings frequently. I expect you to do the readings as assigned and on time, and to be prepared to talk about them.

Even more important than the assigned reading will be the news articles that you find and read on your own. Reading environmental stories in the popular press is a required part of this course. I will set aside some time each class to dissect recently published environmental stories, and will assign one or two people each week to lead

the discussion. When it's your assigned week, I expect you to write a 500- to 700-word critique of a recently published story you will choose. You'll hand in your critique after the discussion. (Please make copies of the article you found for everyone.) The articles you pick for your critiques should be: a) on environmental topics, b) written for a broad, non-specialized audience, c) between 500 and 2,000 words long, and d) less than perfect (because how do you critique a perfect story?) but not so awful that your criticisms are obvious.

The point of the critiquing exercise is to ask and answer questions such as: Was the writing effective? Was the sourcing complete? How could the piece have been organized better? How would your reporting strategy have been different? Your job is not just to show what went wrong in a piece of journalism, but more importantly to figure out what you would do differently to improve the piece.

There are, of course, many places you can find mass-market environmental stories to critique. If you're stumped, here are a few ideas, some obvious and some less so: newspapers such as the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Newsday, USA Today; magazines such as Time, Newsweek, US News, Harper's, Esquire, Mother Jones, Smithsonian, Discovery, Outside, E Magazine, Audubon and Chemical and Engineering News; web sites such as livescience.com, discover.com, and many others. Every weekday, the Society of Environmental Journalists also posts a daily selection of new and notable environmental stories from around the country. To find it, go to [sej.org](http://sej.org) and click on "EJ Today". (You don't have to join SEJ to get access to EJ Today, but if you're interested in environmental reporting you'd be nuts not to join.) Other excellent compilation sites include the "in the news" links at [environmentalhealthnews.org](http://environmentalhealthnews.org) and the "straight to the source" links in the "daily grist" section of [www.grist.org](http://www.grist.org).

### Reading List

Here's a tentative reading list for this class. I will be handing out excerpts, e-mailing you PDF scans, or sending you to web sites, so you don't need to buy any of these books, though in some cases you might find it easier to do so. Most are worth keeping – except mine, perhaps.

Gregg Easterbrook, *A Moment on Earth*

Dan Fagin, Marianne Lavelle and the Center for Public Integrity, *Toxic Deception*  
Foundation for American Communications, *Reporting on Risk Assessment*.

Available online at this address: [www.facsnet.org/tools/ref\\_tutor/risk/index.php3](http://www.facsnet.org/tools/ref_tutor/risk/index.php3)

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*

John McPhee, *The John McPhee Reader*

Chris Mooney, *The Republican War on Science*. Chapter One available online at this address: [www.waronscience.com/excerpt.php](http://www.waronscience.com/excerpt.php)

John Muir, *Table of Contents*

### Grades

Your final grade in this class will be a combination of your written work and class discussion. Here's the formula:

700-word critique: 5 percent of your final grade

600-word news story, 10 percent  
300-word descriptive nature essay: 10 percent  
Second 700-word critique and presentation: 10 percent  
Toxicology assignment: 5 percent  
Epidemiology assignment: 5 percent  
1,600-word feature: 20 percent  
800-word news story, 10 percent  
Class participation (including attendance): 25 percent

### Discussion

This class is a seminar. Its success depends on robust discussion. Newsrooms are full of skeptics who question everything, and you should emulate them. No dubious assertion, especially by the professor, should go unchallenged. The best journalists take nothing for granted, and take everything with a grain of salt. So come prepared to contribute, to question, to argue – and to be called upon if you're too quiet.

### Deadlines

Coping with deadlines is one of the most valuable skills you are learning in SHERP, because in the world of professional journalism you simply can't sustain a career if you blow deadlines. If you can't meet a deadline for a written assignment in this class, you're expected to have a very good reason. Even the best reason will not be good enough to avoid being marked down for lateness.

### Scheduling and Attendance

Because discussion is such an important part of the course, and because we are going to move quickly through a lot of material, I do expect you to show up for class each week. If there's some reason you can't, you need to let me know beforehand via e-mail or telephone.

### Contacting Me, Contacting You

You're welcome to contact me any time at dan.fagin@nyu.edu. If you prefer good old-fashioned interpersonal communication – and who doesn't? – you can call me at my NYU office (212-998-7971) or my home office (516-801-2477). Better still, you can find me in person at my office before or after class. It's also important that you give me your current e-mail address in case I need to reach you.

### Course Sequence

We may detour as the term progresses, but here's the tentative plan:

Week One: Overview

Week Two: Environmental Law

Week Three: Investigative Reporting, Databases

Week Four: Covering Climate / Story Meeting

Week Five: Peer Editing

Week Six: Nature Writing

Week Seven: Story Meeting / Peer Editing

Week Eight: Digital platforms

Week Nine: Communicating Risk

Week Ten: Toxicology and Exposure Assessment / Peer Editing

Week Eleven: Epidemiology

Week Twelve: Story Meetings

Week Thirteen: Advocacy and Analysis / Peer Editing

Week Fourteen: Spin