

Science and Nature Writing

English 491
Winter, 2015

Office Hours: MW: 2:30-3:20. 4:20-5:40, after 9:00 pm
Also by appointment. Please come in!
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“Science could explain people, but it could not understand them.”

E.M. Forster, *Howard's End*

Concept

We live in a technological world. Each day something like 7,000 new science articles are written; every twenty months or so the scientific information known to humanity doubles. In such an environment, both specialists and generalists struggle to communicate the latest advances in their fields. Because their news has the potential for incalculable impact on our lives, productivity, future, science and nature writing make key and yet often overlooked fields of communications today.

The ability to understand, evaluate, investigate and convey scientific information is in demand. Books by some of the most advanced scientists, from Stephen Hawking to the University of Chicago's Neil Shubin and Wisconsin's Marlene Zuk top bestseller lists. Some American newspapers and magazines devote whole sections to science. Technology newsletters and apps have risen dramatically in number. In fields like health, physics, chemistry, telecommunications, computers, biotechnology, even refuse collection, there exists a need born of the gap between an explosion of information and the public's need for knowledge.

This is an advanced course in the art of filling that gap. Students will read and write wonderful stories in a variety of forms—from news releases, essays and columns to investigative pieces and feature articles. We learn the skills of finding stories, and reporting, writing and selling them. We define science as broadly as possible, from nature, health and recreation to traditional sciences like physics and astronomy, to softer sciences like economics or sociology.

Most of all, this is a course in storytelling. Beginning with research updates, we move on to feature articles and the most creative and artful modes of writing. We operate on the principle that articles are to be submitted for publication in magazines, newspapers and on websites. We are here to dream, to analyze and to share the awe and wonder of a mysterious world.

Required Texts

Mary Knudson and Deborah Blum, eds., *A Field Guide for Science Writers*
Deborah Blum, ed., *Best American Science and Nature Writing 2014*

Requirements

Attendance: If you must be absent, please check in and email me your assignments. More than two absences will lower the grade. More than three absences (30% of class) will result in failure. Unexcused late article will be penalized one grade for each class period it is tardy.

Plagiarism: Will result in an F for the course.

Science and nature writing may be difficult. Relax. We will help. We all seek the same goal: finding confidence in our ability to develop, write and sell great stories.

Grade: <u>Activity</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Comment Sheets, Participation	15%
Press Release	10%
Final Article or Essay 1 (with query)	25%
Final Article or Essay 2	25%
Author Report	15%
In-class writing, three quizzes	10%

Both articles 1 and 2 may be submitted as rewrites. In grading, we pay attention to marketability. Would an editor buy this? Is the concept clear? Is the article structured well? Entertaining? Well-researched? Professionally rendered? Two of the three must include research.

Submitting articles for workshop: When your article is up for **class** comment, *post it on D2L the Friday before the workshop session when it is to be discussed.* More on this in class.

Some Pointers

Readings. The articles demonstrate a range of styles. They give ideas for solving problems that come up in researching and structuring your own articles. Read them (or any science essay or article in the future, especially those you like) as a writer. Figure out how the writer thought: how did he or she keep you interested? What's different about the concept or structure? Think about the language, the lead and closing, and the research involved.

The readings should offer tips in a sequential order of challenge, opening our minds to inspire or imitate. We want to relax, focus, think big and assist each other.

Websites. Here are some good URLs to know:

www.eurekalert.org, www.prnewswire.com www.profnet.com (Experts and story ideas)

www.nasw.org (National Association of Science Writers)

www.sciencemag.org (*Science* and the American Association for the Advancement of Science)

www.nature.com (*Nature*, the European predecessor to *Science*)

www.nytimes.com (Every Tuesday the “Science Times” section appears)

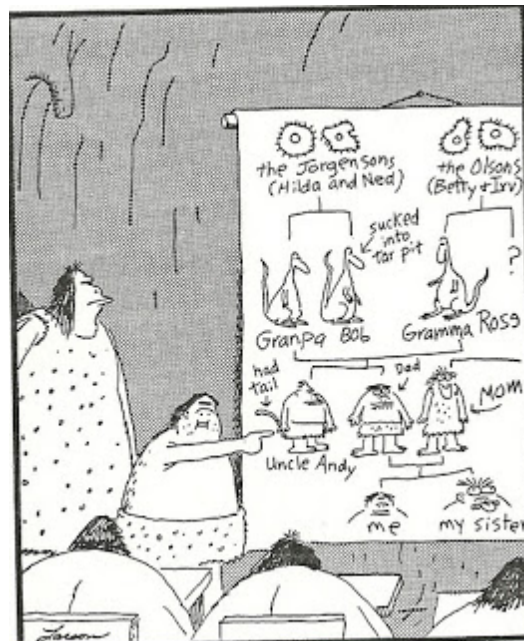
Two cool women science communicators: www.iflscience.com/ thebrainscoop.tumblr.com/

Queries. Query letters are proposals to editors suggesting that they hire you to write an article.

Turn query letters in with your articles. These should be addressed to real editors at real magazines; the grade depends on the marketability of your approach. Then, send them out.

By the end of this class we want to know how to:

- Write and sell science nature stories, to publish one, and thus be in a position to free lance or apply for jobs in the field.
- Find good investigators and research such stories.
- Have some fun, gain some courage, and enjoy talking to interesting people.
- Read and learn about the wonders of the world
- Handle the rigors of rejection and acceptance, and publishing
- Improve our skills of editing, for our own work and for others



... Dirk brings his family tree to school

- A Secret Society**
- 1/7 Coming Up with Science-Related Ideas. Map of the Field
Hand out sample press releases, assignment for next week
In-class writing of press releases, self-understanding.
- 1/14 **Write for Story: Finding Ideas**
Everyone writes one press release. Present one pop science article.
Submit on paper 7-9 article ideas. *Field Guide*, Sections 1, 2, 4, 20 (Ideas)
Story types: Wonder, Investigation, Conceptual breakthrough
Read: Entire syllabus including press releases, Angier, "Busy As a Bee?"
BASNW: Amy Harmon, "The Race to Save the Orange..." *NY Times Mag* 38
Mary Roach, "How Other People's Gut Bacteria Can Save Us." *Guardian* D2L
Robert Irion, "It All Began in Chaos," *National Geographic* D2L
- 1/22 **Research and Obsession**
Group I, Plan 1. Group II optional.
Read: *Field Guide*, Chapters 5, 6, 17, 19 (Reporting and Writing)
BASNW, Dobbs, "Social Life of Genes," *Pacific Standard* 19
Maryn McKenna, "Imagining the Post-Antibiotic Future," *Medium* 188
Liam Drew, "The Scrotum is Nuts," www.slate.com D2L
- 1/28 **A Biologist's Lab, Experiments in Composing**
Group II, III, Plan 1. Group I, Article 1.
Visit biologist Stan Cohn's laboratory, 6-7 pm
Field Guide, 7, 9, 10, 12 (Markets and Writing)
BASNW: Virginia Hughes, "23 and You" *Matter* 72
Corey Powell, "The Madness of the Planets" *Nautilus* 222
Miriam Goldstein, "Don't Panic: Sustainable Seafood," Blog
DePaul biologist Stan Cohn researches movement in diatoms, one-celled organisms that make up most of pond scum, and avidly folk sings.
- Friday **Group 1 posts their article draft on D2L under "Discussions"**
- 2/4 **Profiles**
Group II, Article 1. Group 1, Workshop 1
Paul Hoffman, "The Man Who Loves Only Numbers" *Atlantic* D2L
Wendee Nicole, Tipping the scale: how a political economist could save the world's forests" www.mongabay.com
Ted Genoways, "The Woman Who Loves Orcas," *On Earth* D2L
- Friday **Group 2 posts their article draft on D2L under "Discussions"**

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- 2/11 ***Issues and Ethics***
Group I, Plan 2. Group III, Article 1. Group II, Workshop 1
BASNW: Barbara Kind, "When Animals Mourn," *Scientific American*, 115
Fred Pearce, "TV as Birth Control," *Conservation* 213
Lauren Slater, "Stanley Milgram" D2L
Field Guide, 23-28 (Life Sciences)
- Friday **Group 3 posts their article draft on D2L under "Discussions"**
- 2/18 ***Careers, Essays***
Guest Speaker, Jim Kompare, GA Communications
Group II, Plan 2. Group I, Article 2. Group III, Workshop 1
Field Guide, 30-32 (Environment Writing). Sign up for individual meetings
John Moir, "Nature's Blinded Visionaries," *Catamaran* D2L
Jim Kompare is a MAW graduate who is Senior Writer at GA Communications Group, focused on medical communications. He is a rock guitarist.
- Friday **Group 1 posts their article draft on D2L under "Discussions"**
- 2/25 ***Memoir***
Group III, Plan 2. Group II, Article 2. Group I, Workshop 2.
Julie Caddick Caulfield, "Night in the ER" *Radiology Magazine* D2L
BASNW: Bill Sherwonit, "Twelve Ways of Viewing Alaska's Wild White Sheep," 251
Sign up for Individual Meetings.
- Friday **Group 2 posts their article draft on D2L under "Discussions"**
- 3/4 ***Wonder: A Shark Researcher's Lab***
Group III, Article 2. Group II, Workshop 2
Visit UIC Associate Professor Jennifer Schmidt's Lab 900 South Ashland.
BASNW: Maggie Koerth Barth, "Danger: This Trip to Mars Could Bore You to Death!" 131, *New York Times Magazine*
Jennifer V. Schmidt is a DePaul alum who researches shark conservation efforts every summer in the Caribbean, and studies hydrocephaly in mice
- Friday **Group 3 posts their article draft on D2L under "Discussions"**
- 3/11 ***Skepticism, A Party***
Group III. Workshop 2
BASNW Kate Sheppard, "Under Water," *Mother Jones*, 238
Rebecca Solnit, "The Separating Sickness" *Harper's*, 266
- 3/16 **Final articles due via email by 6 p.m.**