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Journalism Program
Piedmont Project

I've taught Science Journalism, Science Communication, and Environmental Journalism previously, but made substantial changes to my new course this fall at Emory based on my Piedmont Project experience.

First, I've incorporated a "Writing with all your senses" exercise early in the semester modeled on the great nature walks we took as part of the Piedmont Project workshop. I've adapted it some by asking students to spend a full half hour quiet some place new---while I encourage them to find a quiet spot in nature to do so, they can choose any location as long as it is new and they are quiet and observe as much as possible with all their senses. I tried this in my week-long "Science Journalism" boot camp for graduate students this summer and they all loved it and it was a great way to introduce to them the idea of listening, smelling, seeing, touching (and even tasting) to give the reader a sense of their experience.

Second, in addition to global climate change, I've incorporated the idea of sustainability as an over arching theme for our entire semester. The class is focused on science and health writing and both sustainability and climate change are so large and so encompassing to allow each student to choose topics of their own that can fit under those umbrellas. We will begin with sustainability using some of the readings provided for us in the workshop, as well as some others I've located to frame a foundation of what the term means and how it can be applied to a wide range of science and health issues. I've already asked Ciannat Howett to speak to the class about the proposals Emory is making with regards to sustainability as another way to introduce the concept.

Ultimately I've adapted the course to use these two larger themes to provide a thread to connect all the varied and diverse topics we'll cover in the course and to create a cohesive model for our final projects that will be posted to our web site. I expect that several of them will be as strong as work in previous classes and that their publication on our web site will serve as an excellent resource for the Emory community (and beyond) to learn more about these topics.

J380WR-Health and Science Writing
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COURSE OBJECTIVES

Every day our world grows more dependent on science and technology. Changes in medicine represent huge, almost daily, advancements in health and quality of life, while environmental challenges, such as global climate change and pollution, present new opportunities for both scientific inquiry and news coverage. Research tells us the public learns about these complex and challenging issues primarily from mass media reporting and not directly from the scientists and scholars who conduct the primary research. The way media report about these issues is important for both short-term and long-term decisions made by individuals, corporations and governments. This class will take both an academic and professional perspective on this growing and dynamic field. Through a varied selection of readings, exercises, guest speakers and projects, we will critically analyze and practice science and medical journalism.

Topics to be discussed:

Interviewing scientists and specialists
Understanding basic elements and structures to good science writing
Using all your senses to write
Understanding the concepts of scientific certainty and uncertainty
Understanding the challenges faced by both scientists and journalists
Communicating complex science to lay audiences

General Themes:

Given its potential impact on so many systems (both natural and human) the science of climate change will be one topic area that we will study intensively so that you will understand both the science and how to accurately report on it.

The second overarching theme to frame our discussions will be the concept of sustainability. First we'll wrestle with a working definition of sustainability and then address ways in which it too reaches across so many science and medical disciplines. A series of web links discussing the concept will be posted to our class Blackboard site and other handouts will be provided to frame our early discussions about sustainability and then how to incorporate this frame into all our science and medical reporting.

One of your two major projects must incorporate one/both of these themes as a way to construct a congruent, connected body of work from the class that can be posted to our website. Think of this as a special supplement that might appear in a newspaper, or extended series that a national broadcast news outlet, such as CNN, might produce.

CLASS STRUCTURE

The class structure will be discussion oriented and will focus on further development of critical thinking skills. While the professor has substantial experience in this field and will lead many discussions, there will be no intent to lecture in the traditional method. Classes will consist of group projects, a press conference, a field trip, guest speakers (including Ciannat Howett, Director of Sustainability at Emory; CNN's Medical Producer Matt Sloane and CNN's Science and Technology Producer Marsha Walton) and lots of writing and re-writing. Each student will also present a science/medical journalism example that "works." Your goal will be to explain how and why the communication works. If you have a special area of interest, this assignment would allow you to investigate that topic and share your findings with the class.

We will develop a dynamic and synergy that hopefully will make each person feel challenged in their thinking and secure in sharing openly with the group. You must be prepared to participate fully in class meetings. That means completing all assignments before class time and interacting with the class. Class attendance is required. If you will miss class for any reason, you must contact me in advance of the class period and provide proper documentation for an excused absence. Some course release time will occur to allow you time to work on your projects and several one-to-one meetings with me will also occur.

There will be many writing assignments--some will be in class and spontaneous and others will be assigned as homework. Since good journalism begins with strong writing, we will write regularly in this class. The goal will be to hone your writing skills while sharpening your understanding about science issues. Since this class is a mix of journalism undergraduate students and graduate students in several science disciplines you will become important resources for each other. Those with more writing experience will help mentor your classmates on good journalism, while those with a stronger science background will help mentor others on basic issues such as how the scientific method works. As your professor with both 10+ years of news experience and a Ph.D. in a science discipline, I hope to illustrate for you the nexus of these two fields, but each of you will also bring some important background to our shared experience.

READING MATERIALS

"Worlds Apart: How the Distance between Science and Journalism Threatens America's Future." (a free hard copy will be provided to you on the first day of class and/or you can download a free copy from [freedomforum.org](http://www.freedomforum.org) under "publications").

<http://www.freedomforum.org/templates/document.asp?documentID=13087>

"A Field Guide for Science Writers." Edited by Deborah Blum, Mary Knudson and Robin Marantz Henig. Oxford Press, 2006.

"Communicating Uncertainty: Media Coverage of New and Controversial Science." Edited by Sharon M. Friedman, Sharon Dunwoody, and Carol Rogers. Earlbaum, 1999. Other assorted handouts and readings to be provided.

COURSE EVALUATION

In addition to various writing assignments, we will also review and critique examples of award winning science and health journalism to get a deeper understanding of how the best in the business do their work. You will then do the same for a project of your choosing. All work must be turned in on deadline. No late work will be accepted. This is a hard reality of all journalism. Please spell check and edit all work. Any errors in grammar, spelling, syntax and proof-reading will be deleterious to your grade. All work must follow the proper protocol (demonstrated in first class) and should be double-spaced and paper clipped (not stapled) together.

- 10%-Participation (including class presentations and leading discussions)
- 15%-First Writing Assignment
- 15%-First Writing Assignment rewrite
- 25%-Other Writing Assignments
- 35%-Final Project

FINAL THOUGHTS

This is a newly configured course that reflects the demand for accurate, compelling reporting on what are arguably two of the most important topics of our time: science and medicine. Audience research indicates a high level of interest in both topics, but many reporters are intimidated by the subject material. By the end of the semester you should feel comfortable reading and writing about science and health issues, including the challenges of working with numbers and intricate and often esoteric terminology and concepts, so that you can carve out a valuable and rewarding career writing about issues that matter so much to the public.