

Sheila Tefft
Journalism
Interdisciplinary Studies, Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts
Emory University
Course name: Health and Science Writing
August 1, 2014

I joined the Piedmont Project to develop a new environmental journalism course but soon found the many ideas spilling over into my existing Health and Science Writing class. As I rethought Health and Science Writing after the Piedmont Project experience, I found environmental and public health emerging as a central theme. I have refashioned the course to reflect the multimedia nature of journalism and equip the students with a full range of writing, reporting and technology skills to cover the intersection of health and the environment. I first tried out many of these ideas in Health and Science Writing and found them so effective and well received, they are now in my environmental journalism syllabus as well.

- Students will have the opportunity to do the majority of their semester writing on an environmental health topic and to publish their work in CancerQuest, a nationally recognized education site based at Emory University. At the end of the semester, the best student writing will be selected and published on the site.
- The class views the “Healthy Human Habitats” TEDTalk by Howard Frumkin, dean of the University of Washington School of Public Health; students then write a blog about whether their hometowns are healthy communities and how they can be improved.
- Students engage in a class exercise in a forested area near Emory. They spend a half-hour by themselves and use all their senses to observe the area; they then record their observations and edit them into a coherent powerful scene. (I use an excerpt from *The Forest Unseen* as a reading for this exercise.)
- I include a unit on climate change that may involve a visit to The Weather Channel or a discussion with a faculty member from the Climate@Emory faculty interest group.
- In the Listen like a Science Writer exercise, I have students watch a short segment on Mars from the old Carl Sagan *Cosmos* and record examples of powerful writing by the astrophysicist and environmental activist. We then discuss his message and writing techniques.
- The class takes a field trip to an Emory laboratory to interview a scientist about his or her research and make observations. The students use the information to write an anecdotal lead and nut paragraph for a feature story. I would like to visit an Emory lab involved in pesticide residue research, as mentioned by Ciannet Howett during the Piedmont Project.

JRNL 380W: HEALTH AND SCIENCE WRITING

Emory University

INSTRUCTOR: **Sheila Tefft, Senior Lecturer,
Interdisciplinary Studies, Graduate
Institute of the Liberal Arts**

OFFICE: **Callaway S413**

TELEPHONE: **404-727-6133**

E-MAIL: **stefft@emory.edu**

OFFICE HOURS:

THE COURSE

About Health and Science Writing

“The ideal scientist thinks like a poet, works like a clerk and writes like a journalist.”

E.O. Wilson
Biologist, naturalist and Pulitzer Prize-winning author

Science shapes our lives every day. Science and technology have enabled our strides toward better health and lifestyles, but daunting threats to the environment and our wellbeing demand more research and public attention. Although scientists influence policy and public perceptions, the news media are the primary way we learn about complexities and understand successes and failures. By striving for excellence in writing and reporting about science and health, you will join the public discourse on some of our most crucial issues, help educate the public and contribute your ideas to improving our world.

This is a journalism class focused on reporting and writing about health and science for newspapers, radio, magazines, online sites and social media. Since the journalism industry has become multimedia in nature, you will learn ways to write and use technology to produce powerful print, online and broadcast journalism. This course does not assume any background in journalism.

Student work will be published on a course ScholarBlogs site that will allow you to read each other’s writing, engage in online conversations and create a course community. The class also will have the opportunity to write for the CancerQuest, a nationally recognized education site based at Emory University. At the end of the semester, the best student writing will be selected and published on the site.

Although the assignments are designed with strong digital components, you will still focus on the traditional skills of researching, identifying and developing sources,

reporting in-depth, interviewing, making observations, and improving your writing. You will find these journalistic techniques form the basis of all writing for non-expert audiences. Our goal will be masterly storytelling across media platforms.

Each student will choose a relevant topic for the semester and fully research it. Strong writing is grounded in thorough research and reporting. The majority of your writing this semester will focus on that subject. This is an opportunity to expand your horizons and also develop in-depth knowledge in a particular area. In journalism, we call this developing a beat.

As a health and science writer, your task will be to interpret scientific research and engage the public in debates and issues. Beyond translating science, you will be expected to understand articles, events and developments and be able to explain their meaning. Critical judgment and skepticism are important qualities of successful reporters and writers. We will work on developing these attributes by reading and listening to top-notch journalism, discussing techniques with reporters and scientists, and striving to produce stories that assess all sides, are nuanced and accurate, and are written to captivate readers and viewers.

In Health and Science Writing, a writing intensive course, revision and rewriting will be as important as deadlines. We will focus on the writing process--producing powerful and original journalism through stages of writing, critique and revision. You will research issues and developments and conduct interviews for your stories. You will write, learn from critiques and then rewrite. I will meet you regularly to discuss your writing.

I will conduct this class as a writing workshop and expect each of you to “workshop” one of your stories during the semester. This will involve submitting a draft of your story to other students ahead of time and then doing a short presentation explaining your writing decisions to the class. We will then discuss the piece.

A workshop benefits the writer by learning what others find confusing and needs rewriting. It also benefits the rest of the class—the editors—by discovering ways to improve their own work. Journalism is a public act, and you have to get used to having your writing discussed and critiqued publicly. That said, everyone should be polite and cite both strong and weak points.

I also expect you to be an engaged participant. Students must come to class prepared to discuss readings and assignments and will be asked to submit questions for guest speakers ahead of presentations. Good journalists and scientists are well-informed and critical readers and viewers. You should be regularly reading *The New York Times* and its science section and following environment developments in the news. I also ask you to read the blogs listed on the course Blackboard site.

This class will enable students to learn side by side. Our goal as a class is to gain insight across science and learn from each other’s strengths.

Course Texts and Materials

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, Rebecca Skloot

Course readings will be posted on Course Reserves

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

This is a writing-intensive journalism course. You will write and undertake different kinds of print, broadcast and online writing—a blog, an op-ed, a feature story, a podcast and social media. You also will complete do research on your semester topic and learn to evaluate sources. We will emphasize clear, concise writing, solid research and reporting, and the accurate presentation of facts.

We will pay close attention to the mechanics of good writing: grammar, spelling, punctuation, precise word choice, strong sentences and well-organized paragraphs and stories. We will use these building blocks to help you develop ease in writing for the professional world.

For each of the op-ed, podcast and feature assignments, you will submit rough and final drafts. When you submit your rough drafts, we will hold a writing workshop on the assignment. I will assign the pieces to be discussed in each workshop. After the workshop, I will critique and grade your rough draft and be available to meet with you. You will then rewrite and submit a final draft for grading.

All assignments must be submitted by e-mail on the designated due date at the beginning of class. Deadlines are taken seriously in this course and late assignments will not be accepted, except in the case of a documented personal or family emergency.

Please submit your assignments via Emory email. The Emory spam filter will likely remove your assignments if they are submitted on an outside email account.

Prepare your stories as if they are being submitted to a publication. Use a word processor. Double-space stories, and leave one-inch margins. Please use 12-point type.

1. Researching your class topic, 10 percent.

Choose a topic for the semester and fully research the subject. Write a two-page report summarizing the main issues, recent developments and sources you might use in your story. Choose at least five sources and analyze them for your research, including a news article, opinion piece or op-ed, a scientific study, a radio report, and a newspaper feature or magazine article. You will complete an assessment handout for each article and submit the five assessments with your report.

The project will lay the groundwork for your writing this semester. I expect you to stay current on your topic throughout the semester and share news and insights about your beat via our Twitter class feed.

2. Op-ed, 15 percent

Write a fully developed opinion piece or op-ed of 800 words or about four pages. The article, based upon your chosen semester topic, should be researched well and follow a line of argument.

3. Feature article, 25 percent.

Write a 1200-word feature story (five-six pages) related to the topic you selected for class. You will complete recorded interviews for this assignment and also use them in producing a podcast.

4. Podcast assignment, 20 percent. Write a podcast script on the topic you selected for the course. You will incorporate your script and recorded interviews into a produced podcast.

5. Blog and social media, 15 percent.

You will write two 600-word blogs and create one online presentation. You also will be expected to share news and insights about your beat via the Twitter class feed.

6. Class participation, 15 percent

We live in lively and challenging times. I expect you to prepare for and participate fully in class discussions and presentations. When you are reading and responding to personal emails, you are not participating. This will count against your overall participation grade.

YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES

I place great emphasis upon these responsibilities:

1. Honor Code

Plagiarism undermines a journalist's credibility. It will not be tolerated. Any incident will be reported to the Emory Honor Council. Please read the attached the Journalism Program Plagiarism Statement carefully.

2. Attendance and Punctuality

Attending every class and arriving on time is imperative. Everyone's input is important to a rich and beneficial classroom experience. I will take attendance at the beginning of each class and expect everyone to be present. Late arrivals are very disruptive and disrespectful to your classmates and me.

I consider more than two unexcused absences excessive and will reduce your grade in proportion to the number above this limit. Other absences for illness or personal emergencies need to be documented in writing. In-class participation represents a significant portion of your grade. It is important for you to attend every class meeting and be engaged.

3. Deadlines

Assignments are due by the class period on the stipulated deadline. Late papers, without a valid excuse, will not be accepted.

4. Accuracy

A major factual error on a paper, such as the misspelling of a name, will result in a lowered grade. Students who make repeated major errors will be penalized.

5. Copy Preparation

Prepare your stories as if they are being submitted to a publication. Use a word processor. Double-space stories, and leave one-inch margins.

CLASS SCHEDULE

WEEK 1:

Science in the news: what does it mean to be a science writer?

What makes for high-caliber science, health and medical reporting?

Discussion of the semester blueprint

Good writing and hooking the reader

Tweeting science

WEEK 2:

Listen like a science writer: the powerful writing of Carl Sagan

The writing life in a life of science

Guest speaker: Dr. Gregg Orloff, assistant professor of hematology and medical oncology in the Emory School of Medicine, senior lecturer in the Department of Biology, director of CancerQuest Education Program

WEEK 3:

Story ideas, finding and cultivating sources, and story pitches

Researching your beat

Guest speaker: Jennifer Elder, research librarian, Woodruff Library

Sources and attributing information

WEEK 4:

The explainer blog

Explain everything presentation

Assessing medical coverage: how well do journalists cover the news?

WEEK 5:

Writing the op-ed

The power of observation: journalism and the scientific method
A walk in the woods: the power of observation

WEEK 6:

The feature: telling the bigger story

Workshop on op-ed rough drafts

WEEK 7:

Reporting medical studies and writing about uncertainty and risk

Radio writing and delivery, guest speaker

WEEK 8:

Audacity workshop and in-class editing

Story structure: print vs. broadcast

WEEK 9:

The feature story and the anecdotal lead
Spice up your writing with quotations

Field trip: reporting and observation in the laboratory

WEEK 10:

Journalists and scientists: negotiations, managing disease outbreaks, and the Zombie Apocalypse, guest speaker

Interviewing

WEEK 11:

News and numbers

Health and the environment: is your home community healthy?
“Healthy Human Habitats,” TEDTalk by Howard Frumkin, dean of the University of

Washington School of Public Health

WEEK 12:

Writing workshop on feature story rough drafts

Reporting on international and global health threats

WEEK 13:

Field trip to CNN: behind the news at the CNN Medical Unit

Covering health care policy

WEEK 14:

Writing workshop on podcast scripts

Discussion, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

WEEK 15:

Investigating health and science

Climate change and the politics of science, guest speaker

WEEK 16:

Showtime and class presentations