Current Topics in Science, Health and Environmental Journalism (Fall 2019), G54.1017
Room 653, 20 Cooper Square
Tuesdays, 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. (with breaks!)

Instructor: Dan Fagin
Professor of Journalism, New York University
Director of the Science, Health and Environmental Reporting Program

Office Hours: Room 712, 20 Cooper Square: Tuesdays after class and Wednesdays 4-5.

Overview

This aim of this course is to introduce you to the world of science journalism in two important ways: covering a science-related beat, and case studies of cutting-edge topics that are the raw material for great science journalism. Our goal throughout will be to understand and adopt the practices that the very best science journalists use when covering newsworthy and often controversial science. You will learn how they find and pitch worthy story ideas, do background research, interact with sources, organize their reporting and then write, edit and re-write their stories. A key learning tool will be in-class workshopping of the stories you produce. As you immerse yourselves in challenging areas of current science, you will read the work of highly accomplished researchers and journalists and hear from them directly in class. You will also sharpen your skills by writing for the SHERP webzine, *Scienceline*. You’ll be covering a beat and following peer-reviewed journals, blogs and other sources to stay on top of the news as it happens. You won’t just be studying science news, you’ll be breaking it.

Learning Objectives

- Demonstrate awareness of journalism’s core ethical values
- Write clear, accurate and engaging prose in an audience-appropriate manner
- Demonstrate critical thinking, independence, and creativity appropriate to the role of journalism in a democratic society
- Interview subjects, conduct research, and evaluate information
- Work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness, and diverse perspectives
- Use technological tools and apply quantitative concepts as appropriate

Course Structure

We will begin the semester by focusing on the basics of covering science news, including working a beat, mining the journals, recognizing news, interviewing and developing reporting strategies. We will then plunge into our case studies and writing projects, with short interruptions to focus on editing and media law, among other topics. We’ll also go on working trips to Brookhaven National Laboratory and *The New York Times*.

In addition to learning the tools and practicing the techniques science journalists use to cover news, we will explore four topics as in-depth case studies, guided by distinguished visiting journalists and scientists. In each case, you will do preparatory readings and in-class interviews and will then practice transforming what you’ve learned into engaging, accurate journalism.
Current Topics Syllabus, 2018

Beats

Beat coverage is at the core of journalism, and of this class. We will follow a newsroom model, with each of you covering an assigned beat. You will be expected to keep up to date with newly published research on your beat in scientific journals as popular media. You will write three beat-related stories plus an event story that does not need to be beat-related.

On the first day of class, we’ll assign 12 beats, based on a combination of your preferences and the needs of the class. My goal is for each of you to end up with a beat that interests you but that you don’t know much about, because you’ll learn more that way. Here are the 13 beats to choose from (there’s one extra):

• Climate Change and Earth Science
• Drugs (legal and illegal)
• Ecology and Evolution
• Energy
• Environmental Health and Pollution
• Genetics and Biotechnology
• Health and Prevention
• Medical Practice
• Microbes
• Physics, Chemistry and Math
• Psychology and Neuroscience
• Space
• Technology

At the beginning of each class (except the first one), I’ll call on one or two of you at random to briefly update the rest of us on one piece of timely news you’ve found on your beat, and we’ll discuss how to turn that news into a solid piece of science journalism, either as a news story, feature, video, data visualization, podcast or some other story form. To be ready to be called upon, you must follow your beat closely and continually. Everything you’ll need to read in order to do so is available free online via the journals and databases you can access via NYU Home (you’ll learn about these databases at the mandatory library training session).

Writing Assignments

There will be writing assignments in and out of class. In addition to writing about our case studies in class, you will write (and re-write!) four graded stories: a 500-word news story, a 450-word event story, a 750-word explainer and a 1,000-word feature. Some of your work, if done well, will end up being published in Scienceline, the webzine you will be running for a year, starting at the end of November.

The topics of all of your stories, including your event story, must be cleared with me in advance.

All assignments for this class must be written in Microsoft Word (.doc files), so I can edit them and send them back with comments. If for some reason you must 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, you should e-mail all of your assignments as attached files to dan.fagin@nyu.edu. After I’ve edited your work and returned it to you, you’ll want to be quick to
tweak them and send them on to the relevant Scienceline editor, since timeliness is always helpful in newswriting.

About story lengths: You should take assigned word limits seriously and practice writing as close to assigned length as you can because many editors in the professional world will insist on it. For this class, I’ll accept stories within 100 words of the assigned length. Your 1,000-word story, for instance, should be at least 900 (well chosen) words and no more than 1,100.

**Assigned Readings and Discussion**

The only book you need to buy for this class (you’ll use it for the next 16 months and beyond) is the AP Stylebook, which you can order at [http://www.apstylebook.com/](http://www.apstylebook.com/). The print version costs $22.95 or you can choose online access for a year at $26. The online version is handy because it’s searchable and accessible wherever you’re online, but the paper version you can keep beyond a year. Either way, it’s very important that you buy the Stylebook and use it! **Don’t rely on your peer editors and professors to fix basic style and usage problems in your work** – that’s what the Stylebook is for!

There will be digital readings for all of the case studies and for our days on investigative reporting and on media law and the First Amendment. I will post all pdfs to the class Google Drive folder; other readings will be links. It’s very important that you do all of the assigned readings. We will be moving very quickly through a lot of material on disparate topics, and you’re going to have trouble with the in-class assignments unless you keep up. In-class discussion is a big part of this course (and a major component of your grade), so come to class prepared to contribute – and expect to be called upon if you don’t speak up.

**Grades and Editing**

Learning, not grades, should be the focus of your time at SHERP. Most of your in-class writing will not be graded, but at least some of it will be edited. You should always be your own toughest editor, but you’ll also learn by being edited by many other people: professors, visiting journalists, your classmates and the editors of Scienceline.

Letter grades are not nearly as important as the detailed feedback you will get from your peers and professors, but grades serve a useful purpose because they are a convenient way for you to gauge your progress, so you should pay attention to them.

Here is the formula I will use to calculate your final grade:

- 500-word beat news story, 15 percent
- 450-word event story, 15 percent
- 750-word beat explainer, 20 percent
- 1,000-word beat story, 25 percent
- In-class contributions (case studies and discussion), 25 percent

For the assignments in which you’re doing multiple versions (all but the event story), your grade will be the average of your grade for the first version you turn in to me (the first revise, after peer editing) and your grade for the rewritten version (the second revise).

**Deadlines**
Coping with deadlines is one of the most valuable lessons you will learn in SHERP. In the world of professional journalism, you will not be able to sustain a career if you blow deadlines. If you cannot meet a deadline for a written assignment in this class, I expect you to have a very good reason. Even the best reason will not be good enough to avoid being marked down for lateness. Remember that unless I specify otherwise, all assignments except the event stories are due at 10 a.m. on the due date via email to me as attached Word e-mail files. Event stories are due two hours after the completion of the event.

You are welcome to turn in work early; I edit assignments in the order I receive them. Here are the assignments and due dates:

- 500-word beat story: three pitches due Sept. 16; first draft due to peer editor Oct. 3, returned to writer Oct. 5; first revise due to Dan Oct. 8; second revise due to Dan Oct. 22.
- 750-word beat explainer piece: three pitches due Sept. 30; first draft due to peer editor Oct. 24, returned to writer Oct. 26; first revise due to Dan Oct. 29; second revise due to Dan Nov. 12.
- 1,000-word beat feature story: three pitches due Oct. 21, first draft due to peer editor Nov. 21, returned to writer Nov. 23; first revise due to Dan Nov. 26; second revise due to Dan Dec. 10.
- 450-word event story due to Dan anytime between Sept. 11 and Dec. 9 within two hours of the event’s completion. Note: This story does not have to be on your beat.

Scheduling and Attendance

I expect you to attend every class. If there’s a good reason you must be absent, you need to let me know beforehand via e-mail or telephone.

With two exceptions, the class will meet Tuesdays from 10:00 to as late as 4:30 in Room 653. (Don’t worry – we’ll take breaks and usually won’t go all the way to 4:30!) The exceptions are Oct. 15, when Monday classes will meet, and Nov. 26, when we won’t have class for Thanksgiving week.

We will have two field trips: Sept. 26-27 to Brookhaven National Laboratory (by rented bus, departing from in front of 20 Cooper Square at 9:00 a.m. Thursday and returning by 5 p.m. Friday) and Oct. 22 to The New York Times (we’ll have a regular morning class and then go to the Times for a tour and a feature story pitching session. The Times building is at the corner of 41st St. and Eighth Ave. We’ll meet in the lobby at 1 p.m. and will be done by about 4:30).

Ethical Conduct

Your life as a professional journalist has begun, which means that for the rest of your working life, your obligation is to be your own toughest critic by holding yourself to the highest standards of our profession. While you’re at NYU, your professors will also hold you to those standards, which are outlined in the ethics pledge you will sign and in the NYU Journalism Handbook for Students. Those standards are enforceable by sanctions that can range from a lowered grade to expulsion. Keeping faith with your audience requires understanding what plagiarism means in a journalistic context, how and when to attribute information, and how to treat sources ethically.
Read the pledge and the handbook carefully at http://journalism.nyu.edu/about-us/resources/ethics/, and if you are ever in doubt about an ethics issue talk to a professor! The golden rule for ethical behavior is: When in doubt, seek counsel from someone who is more experienced and whose advice you value.

Your Health

SHERP can be stressful. We’re preparing you for a challenging (but fun!) profession, so things are going to get intense at times, especially when deadlines loom. Living in an unfamiliar city can worsen the stress. It’s important to pay attention to your own mental and physical health, and to get help when you need it. It’s also important to be supportive of your classmates, and to encourage them to seek assistance if needed. If you’re feeling overwhelmed, please come talk to me or to any of your professors and we’ll do our best to help. And please do not hesitate to take full advantage of all of the professional health resources provided by NYU (after all, you’re paying for them!). The Student Health Center is at 726 Broadway (Third Floor), the number is 212-443-1000 and they do accept walk-ins. There’s also a 24-hour hotline: 212-443-9999.

Contacting Me, Contacting You

I regularly check e-mail; contact me anytime at dan.fagin@nyu.edu. If you prefer good old-fashioned interpersonal communication (and who doesn’t?) you can call me at my home office (516-801-2477). In a pinch, you can try my cell phone (516-660-6383) but try the home office number first because, well, I hate talking on my cell phone. Better still, you can always find me in my NYU office in Room 712 on Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons. The number there is 212-998-7971. It’s also very important that you give me your current e-mail address, and that you check your e-mail frequently in case I need to reach you.

Tentative Weekly Schedule and Assignments

IMPORTANT: This schedule will soon be out of date, so don’t print out or save; instead, keep checking in Google Drive and use the version you see there, which will be continually updated.

Sept. 3

Morning: goals, expectations, syllabus, beat assignments.
Afternoon: Sources and techniques for finding good stories on your beat. Guest speakers (at 1:30): ClimateWire staff writer Chelsea Harvey (SHERP 32) and Axios space writer Miriam Kramer (SHERP 30).

IMPORTANT: On Sept. 5 from 10:00 to 12:30 in Room 743 (the ‘LearnStudio’) of Bobst Library on Washington Square South, you have a mandatory training session on databases and other online research tools, conducted by NYU Science Librarian Hope Lappon. Make sure you complete your quiz by then.

Assignment due Sept. 10: Identify five diverse news sources on your beat (not including those from previous classes) and add them to the beat files in Google Drive (open the “beat sources” subfolder in the class folder).

Sept. 10
Morning: Pitch School. Guest Speakers: Live Science Editor in Chief Jeanna Bryner (SHERP 21) and Popular Science Associate Editor Claire Maldarelli (SHERP 32).
Afternoon: Introduction to event coverage. Story research basics.

Assignments:
1) By 10 a.m. Sept. 16, find three 500-word news story ideas on your beat (only one of which can be a newly published study), write a 100-word strategy and send it to Dan, and also prepare a 60-second oral pitch for each of your ideas. Make sure all three of your ideas are feasible (something you can finish in two weeks).
2) Start looking for an event to cover and get Dan’s approval to reserve it (any science-related event before Dec. 9 is potentially eligible, first come first served).

Sept. 17
Morning: narrowing your three good news story ideas to one great one. 10:15 Guest editor: Associated Press science writer Malcolm Ritter.
Afternoon: Interviewing + introduction to explainers. We’ll also preview the case study. At 3:00, Rene Ebersole will explain the internship program.


Sept. 24
Case Study I: Octopus Ethics. Guest journalist: Washington Post staff science writer Ben Guarino (SHERP 31). Guest Scientist: Research Scientist Becca Franks, NYU

Sept. 26-27 – Brookhaven Lab Trip! Be at 20 Cooper Square at 9:00 a.m. sharp Thursday to meet the bus. You’ll be back before 5 p.m. Friday.

Assignments:
1) By 10 a.m. Sept. 30, find three ideas for 750-word explainers on your beat, send Dan a 100-word strategy for each idea, and also prepare a 60-second oral pitch for each idea.
2) Work on your news story.

Oct. 1
Morning: Narrowing your three good explainer ideas to one great one. Guest editor: IEEE Spectrum News Manager Amy Nordrum (SHERP 32).
Afternoon: Story Structure and Story Editing. Guest speaker at 1:30 p.m.: Mary Beth Griggs (SHERP 29), science editor at The Verge. Assign first round of editor/reporter pairings. Also, structuring news stories.

Assignments:
1) By 10 a.m. Oct. 3, send news story to your assigned peer editor.
2) By 10 a.m. Oct. 5, editors finish your proposed edits (in track changes) of your assigned reporter’s 500-word story, email them to your reporter (with a cc to Dan).
3) By 10 a.m. Oct. 7, email your first revise (peer-edited) 500-word story to Dan.

Oct. 8
Morning: Workshop news stories.
Afternoon: Pitching, reporting and writing a successful feature

Oct. 15 – Robin’s class meets today instead of this class
Assignments:
1) By 10 a.m. Oct. 21, generate three 1,000-word feature ideas on your beat, send Dan a 100-word strategy for each, and also prepare a two-minute oral pitch for each.
2) By 10 a.m. Oct 22, turn in second revise of 500-word news story to Dan.
3) Work on your explainer.

Oct. 22
Morning: Practice feature pitches
Afternoon: Tour and pitching workshop at *The New York Times* (corner of 41st St. and Eighth Ave., meet in the lobby at 12:45 p.m. and finish by 2:30). Narrowing your three good 1,000-word story ideas to one great one. Guest editor: *Times* Senior Staff Editor for Science Michael Roston and colleagues.

1) By 10 a.m. Oct. 24, turn in 750-word explainer to your assigned editor.
2) By 10 a.m. Oct. 26, finish your proposed edits (in track changes) of your assigned reporter’s 750-word explainer, email them to your reporter (with a copy to Dan).
3) By 10 a.m. Oct. 29, e-mail your first revise (peer edited) 750-word explainer to Dan.
Oct. 29

Case Study II: PTSD in First Responders. Guest journalist Rene Ebersole (SHERP 17). Guest Scientist: Dr. Jill Barron, Yale School of Medicine.

Assignments:
1) By 10 a.m. Nov. 5, read First Amendment Handbook and fill out open-book media law quiz (see Media Law Quiz in Google Drive). Bring answers to class.
2) Work on your explainer and feature.

Nov. 5

Morning: Media law and the First Amendment. 10:45: Attorney Kate Bolger of Davis, Wright Tremaine.
Afternoon: Guest speaker at 1:30: Virginia Hughes, deputy editor-in-chief of Buzzfeed News. Also, workshop explainers.

Assignments:
1) By 10 a.m. Nov. 12, turn in second revise of 750-word explainer to Dan

Nov. 12


Assignments:
2) Work on your feature.

Nov. 19

Assignments:
1) By 10 a.m. Nov. 21, turn in 1,000-word feature to your assigned editor.
2) By 10 a.m. Nov. 23, edit your assigned reporter’s 1,000-word feature, return it to your reporter (copy to Dan).
3) By 10 a.m. Nov. 26, turn in your first revise (peer edited) 1,000-word feature to Dan. Work on features.

**Nov. 26 – No class today, enjoy the holiday week!**

**Dec. 3**

Morning: Workshop features
Afternoon: Institutional Communications. Guest speakers: Sarah Fecht (SHERP 29), content manager at the Earth Institute of Columbia University; Jillian Rose Lim (SHERP 32), science writer at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia.

Assignments due Dec 10:
1) By 10 a.m., turn in second revise of feature.

**Dec. 10**

Morning: Journalists-as-authors plus class evaluations. Guest speakers Maria Konnikova, Emily Anthes and Robin Marantz Henig.

**Accommodations**

Students with disabilities that necessitate accommodations should contact and register with New York University’s Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD) at 212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu. Information about the Moses Center can be found at www.nyu.edu/csd. The Moses Center is located at 726 Broadway on the 2nd floor.

**Diversity and Inclusion**

The Institute is committed to creating an inclusive learning environment. The Institute embraces a notion of intellectual community enriched and enhanced by diversity along a number of dimensions.