

**Course Name:** Health and Science Journalism

**Institution:** Mount Holyoke College, Brandeis University

**Instructor:** Alison Bass, Visiting Senior Lecturer, Lecturer in Journalism

**Level:** Undergraduate

**Audience:** Journalism minors and science majors interested in learning how to communicate with the general public about science and medicine

**Semester:** Spring 2011

**Class schedule:** Wednesdays, 1-4 p.m.

### **Course overview**

Scientific progress has brought us both extraordinary medical and scientific advances and serious environmental crises. Good medical and science journalism has never been more important in understanding our world and how to fix it. This course is an introduction to the skills needed to cover science news and communicate with the general public. We will focus on how to analyze scientific journal findings and report and write news stories, longer features and opinion pieces. We will also explore the ethical, social and political issues raised by media coverage of science and medicine.

The heart of this class is learning how to report and write health and science stories. You will begin by writing a news story about a published scientific finding. Your second assignment will be to write a feature story about a health or science issue in the news, employing the reporter's skills of interviewing, research and analysis. Finally, you will learn how to write an opinion piece about an important issue. These assignments are designed to move you from a fairly straightforward challenge (covering the news) to increasing levels of complexity. Each of your three papers will be preceded by a rough draft and a one-on-one meeting with me. This will give you time to revise and improve your work.

### **Required texts and reading**

*A Field Guide for Science Writers*, Second Edition (2005, paperback)

Editors: Deborah Blum, Mary Knudson, Robin Marantz Henig

*Selling Science: How the Press Covers Science and Technology*

(1995, paperback) by Dorothy Nelkin

Medical and science journals as needed for assignments

Articles posted on Mt. Holyoke's internal electronic discussion board, ella

Health and science sections, *The New York Times*

### **Grades**

The grading system will reflect both effort and mastery. I will pay particular attention to the extent to which you are able to move your writing forward through several drafts.

Grades will be counted as follows:

Class participation (including readings): 25%  
News story: 25%  
Issues story: 25%  
Opinion piece: 25%

## **SCHEDULE OF CLASSES AND ASSIGNMENTS**

### **Assignment deadlines**

Assignment 1: News story (700 words)

Draft 1: Wed Feb 16

Rewrite required

Extra credit: Use online social media to find sources

Notes: Write a 700-word double-spaced story about a new health or science finding. For this assignment, most information will be gathered from the journal article and written sources, but interviews with two sources are required.

Assignment 2: News story (900 words)

Draft 1: Wed March 9

Rewrite required

Extra credit: Record interview and upload to your computer.

Notes: Write a 900-word double-spaced story about a newsworthy issue in health and science. Interview at least three sources and one of those interviews has to be in person.

Assignment 3: opinion piece (800 words)

Draft 1: Wed April 6

Rewrite required

Extra credit: Use online social media to find sources.

Notes: Write an 800-word double-spaced opinion piece about an important issue in health or science. Interview at least three sources.

### **Class schedule**

Wed Jan 26: Introduction to Science News Writing

**Reading due:** *Field Guide*, ch. 2; *Selling Science*, ch.1

Wed Feb 2: What is News: What makes a scientific finding newsworthy

**Reading due:** *Selling Science*, ch.2; articles posted online

- Wed Feb 9: Finding Stories and Sources; How to write a news story
- Reading due:** *Field Guide*, chs. 1-3; old *Field Guide* (online), ch. 12  
**Assignment:** Skim *Science*, *Nature*, *JAMA* (Journal of the American Medical Association) and *The New England Journal of Medicine* for discussion. Pick a few newsworthy journal findings for possible stories.
- Wed Feb. 16: Preparing for the Interview
- Reading due:** *Field Guide*, chs. 4, 23; articles online  
**First written assignment due**
- Wed Feb. 23: The Interview: Techniques for Print and Broadcast  
**Guest:** NOVA senior producer
- Reading:** *Field Guide*, chs. 11, 18; article online  
**Draft conferences**
- Wed March 2: How to Write an Issues Feature
- Reading:** *Field Guide*, chs. 4-5; articles online  
**Assignment:** Write pitch paragraphs for three possible issue stories and bring to class  
**First rewrites due**
- Wed March 9: Harnessing the power of the Web for reporting
- Readings:** *Field Guide*, ch. 14; article online  
**Second written assignment due**
- Wed March 16: **No class — mid-winter break**
- Wed March 23: How Scientists Control the News
- Reading:** *Selling Science*, chs. 6, 8-10  
**Guest:** Executive Editor, *Reuters Health News*
- Assignment:** Find three ideas for possible opinion pieces  
**Draft conferences**
- Wed March 30: Constraints on Science Journalists and the Art of Writing Opinion
- Reading:** *Selling Science* ch. 7 (p. 101-105); articles online  
**Assignment:** Write three pitch paragraphs for opinion pieces  
**Second rewrites due**

- Wed April 6: When Science Gets Controversial  
**Guest:** Author of book about scientific fraud  
  
**Reading:** *Selling Science*, ch.4; *Field Guide*, ch.18; articles online  
**Third written assignment due**
- Wed April 13: A Scientist's Perspective on the Media  
**Guest:** Physics professor at Mount Holyoke College  
  
**Reading:** *Field Guide*, ch.16; *Selling Science*, ch.7  
**Draft conferences**
- Wed April 20: Ethics in Health and Science  
**Guest:** Medical ethicist  
  
**Reading:** Articles online  
**Third rewrites due**
- Wed April 27: NO FINAL EXAM  
The future of science journalism and careers in science writing  
  
**Reading:** *Field Guide*, chs. 8-10, 12, 15; articles online