

Course Name: Writing in Biology: Science in the News
Institution: Washington State University, Vancouver
Instructor: Stephani Sutherland, adjunct faculty and academic coordinator, science programs
Course level: Undergraduate
Audience: Biology majors, typically juniors and seniors
Semester: Spring 2010
Class schedule: Fridays 11:00 a.m. to 12: 40 p.m.
Office hours: Fridays 10:00 a.m. to 10:45 a.m., or by appointment
Typical enrollment: 20-40

Required tests and reading:

Writing for Story by Jon Franklin. The Penguin Group, 1986.

The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2008 Jerome Groopman, Editor. Tim Folger, Series editor. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008.

The Elements of Style, Fourth Edition by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White. Allyn & Bacon, 1999.

Webster's American English Dictionary Merriam-Webster 2006, or equivalent.
For an online dictionary source, use: www.m-w.com

Grades and other issues

Academic Integrity: Academic integrity is the cornerstone of the university and will be strongly enforced in this course. Any student found in violation of the academic integrity policy will be given an "F" for the course and will be referred to the Office of Student Conduct. **This includes plagiarism.** All writing assignments must consist solely of your own work. Any resemblance to published materials will result in an inquiry. For additional information about WSU's Academic Integrity policy/procedures please contact (360) 546-9781.

Disability Accommodation: Accommodations may be available if you need them in order to fully participate in this class because of a disability. Accommodations may take some time to implement so it is critical that you contact Disability Services as soon as possible. All accommodations must be approved through Disability Services, located in the Student Resource Center on the Lower Level of Student Services Center (360) 546-9138.

Emergency Notification System: WSU has made an **emergency notification system** available for faculty, students and staff. Please register at myWSU with emergency contact information (cell, email, text, etc). You may have been prompted to complete emergency contact information when registering for classes on RONet. In the event of a **Building Evacuation**, a map at each classroom entrance shows the evacuation point for each building. Please refer to it. Finally, in

case of **class cancellation campus-wide**, please check local media, the WSU Vancouver web page and/or <http://www.flashalert.net/>. Individual class cancellations may be made at the discretion of the instructor. Each individual is expected to make the best decision for his personal circumstances, taking safety into account.

Class Communications: All students are required to sign on to the ANGEL Learning system used for WSUV classes (<http://lms.wsu.edu/>). I may send email to students via ANGEL, but I will mainly use Angel to post information on the Announcement board. Documents and grades will also be posted on ANGEL. You are responsible for information posted via ANGEL.

SCHEDULE OF CLASSES AND ASSIGNMENTS

Assignments

News Presentation: Present a short **news article** reporting a recent scientific finding from a **major print news source**. (Example: The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, The Oregonian, The Columbian, Reuters, Associated Press, some general-audience magazines.) The source may be from a web page (e.g., Yahoo or other search engine) but the article must be intended for print form. (Websites for TV news outlets are not appropriate. Press releases or other promotional materials are not appropriate. General informational web pages, for example the CDC or other agency, are not an appropriate source.) Provide an overhead view (web page OK) of the article for the class during presentation, plus **one hard copy** for me. Original peer-reviewed journal articles are also NOT appropriate for this assignment, but you should consider looking at the Abstract for the original scientific paper that was the news author's source. You can search for this on PubMed.

In your presentation, address the following questions:

- What was the pertinent finding?
- What methods did the researchers use?
- What dissenting points of view or qualifying statements were included?
- What makes this a new breakthrough finding?
- How did it capture your attention?
- If you did look up the research Abstract, what was it like to compare the news and the research articles? Did the news writer accurately and appropriately cover the research finding?

Presentations should last **five minutes** maximum, plus two to three minutes for questions afterwards. The main purpose of this assignment is to expose you to many examples of the science news-writing format in a short period. 50 points.

Writing Assignments

All writing assignments should be delivered to me by the beginning of class on the due date in **double-spaced** hard copy with standard margins. Pay close attention to the word limits. Assignments that exceed word limits will be cut off at the limited point and graded as such. Late submissions will not be accepted without prior arrangements. You may submit electronically if you cannot attend class **and you make prior arrangements** with me. Please label and refer to each assignment by its name below in all communications regarding your submissions. Due

dates and revision due dates are subject to change, but you will be given adequate notice of any changes.

Writing Assignment #1: Short News Article. Produce a short news article from an original research paper in a peer-reviewed journal. I will provide several options for the original paper that you may choose from. The end product should read very much like the news articles seen in your News Presentations. Summarize the key findings in language for the layperson. What is interesting about the finding? Why is it new information (i.e. “news”)? The first sentence, called the lede, should immediately provide the most important information about the finding. Approximately 10 column inches, or 400-450 words MAX.

Writing Assignment #2: Short News Article with Interviews. This article should be similar to the first assignment, but you will have to choose the article AND interview scientists for their input. You should include input from a primary source: a scientist involved directly with the research. If possible, include an interview with a secondary source who was not involved in the research, like a grad student or a professor here at WSU. Articles with multiple sources will be graded higher than those with only one. When contacting potential sources, explain that you are a student and that you have a genuine interest in the work. The institution’s Public Information Officer (PIO) may assist you in choosing a good contact person in the lab. A post-doc or graduate student who worked on the project may be the best sources for the assignment, particularly when the PI is unavailable. 15 inches; 675 words MAX.

Writing Assignment #3: Feature-length Article. This assignment should focus on a body of scientific work or on the work of a particular scientist rather than on a single finding. Identify a source (subject) that will be willing to work with you over repeated interviews. The best subject will be someone you can meet with in person, preferably in their work environment. If at all possible, go to the lab or field with the scientist. Our campus and the surrounding area are full of research scientists working in all kinds of physical, biological, and environmental sciences. Graduate students and post-docs make good subjects as do more experienced researchers. The article may cover published findings as well as information communicated directly by the scientist. Consider interviewing other sources about your main subject, such as people they work with. In writing this longer piece, focus on structure and character development rather than “just the facts.” If you prefer, you can choose a field of study or a body of work as your subject rather than a particular person. If you do so, make sure that you interview multiple sources to give human voices to your piece. It should read like a feature piece in a newspaper or magazine. You should start working to identify your source/ subject **immediately**. 1200-1350 words.

Writing Assignment #3 summary paragraph: This short paragraph will be due several weeks before the writing assignment is due. Identify your main subject (i.e. either a particular person and their work, or a particular body of research, or an organization); identify any sources that you have already interviewed or have scheduled an interview with; list any field activities you have completed or planned in preparation for writing the assignment. 15 pts

Writing Assignment #3 Draft for peer-review Rather than writing a revision of this assignment, your draft that you turn in to me at the end of the term is the final paper, but you will have a chance to get feedback from the peer-review process. You and a classmate will trade

papers in class and guide one another in the revision process for the final draft of your paper. This should NOT look like a rough draft. Prepare your assignment as if this were the real due date, then use the last week to make revisions. 25 pts

Writing Assignment #3 Peer-review process Provide critical but constructive guidance for your classmate in revising the final draft of WA #3. 10 pts

Class Participation will take the form of in-class discussions and writing exercises. When reading is assigned, come prepared to contribute to the discussion. When discussion questions are assigned, please answer them prior to class; they will be included in this portion of the grade. Participation will also be required in giving feedback of fellow students' work (i.e. peer-review). 100 points

Quizzes: 10 quizzes will be given (unannounced) during the course of the semester, primarily covering in-class syntax and grammar lessons. 10 points each; your lowest quiz score will be dropped; total 100 points.

Assignment	Due Date	Points value	Your points
News Presentation	Jan 22, 29, Feb 5, 12	50	
Writing Assignment #1	Jan	75	
WA#1 Revision	Feb 19	50	
WA #2	Mar 5	75	
WA #3 Summary paragraph	Mar 26	15	
WA#2 Revision	Apr 2	50	
WA 3 Draft for peer-review	Apr 23	25	
WA #3 peer-review process	Apr 23	10	
WA #3	Apr 30	150	
Class Participation	Various	100	
Quizzes (10)	Unannounced	100	
Total			

Class schedule

Week	Date	Reading Assignment WfS=Writing for Story BASNW= Best America Science & Nature Writing	DUE
1	Jan 15		
2	Jan 22	WfS: Ch I-IV, pp. 1-90	News presentations
3	Jan 29	BASNW: Autumn of the Multitaskers by Walter Kirn p. 155	News presentations
4	Feb 5		News presentations WA #1
5	Feb 12	WfS: Ch V-VI, pp. 91-132	News presentations
6	Feb 19	BASNW: The Selfless Gene by Olivia Judson p. 143	WA#1R
7	Feb 26	BASNW: The Coming Robot Army by Steve Featherstone p. 75	
8	Mar 5		WA #2
9	Mar 12	WfS: Ch VII-IX, pp. 133-187	
10	Mar 19	SPRING BREAK – NO CLASS	
11	Mar 26		WA #3 summary
12	Apr 2	BASNW: Malaria: Stopping a Global Killer by Michael Finkel p. 93	WA #2R
13	Apr 9	BASNW: Swingers by Ian Parker p. 196	
14	Apr 16		WA #3 Draft for peer-review
15	Apr 23	BASNW: A Bolt from the Blue by Oliver Sacks p. 263	
16	Apr 30	BASNW: Restoring America’s Big, Wild Animals by C. Josh Donlan p. 56	WA #3