



Comm/STS 352: Science Writing for Mass Media

[Home/Info](#) [What's new](#) [Schedule](#) [Readings](#) [Assignments](#) [Labs](#) [Bulletin board](#) [More info](#)

[Click [here](#) to download a .pdf version of the entire syllabus. The updated version of the syllabus appears at <http://instruct1.cit.cornell.edu/courses/comm352>.]

Fall 2003

Instructors

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Time and location

Class: MW 9:05--9:55, Warren 245

Lab 1: W 12:20--2:15, Warren 160

Lab 2: W 2:30-4:25, Warren 160

Course description

What's the OVERALL GOAL?

This course covers science in the mass media, especially "how-to-do-it." It looks at opportunities for covering science, constraints that shape that coverage, and techniques needed to write about science. You will write a lot in this course, and at the end you should know how to begin writing about science for the mass media. We will also talk some about "why-we-do-it," but that 's a secondary goal.

What are we GOING TO ACTUALLY DO?

Most of our classes will be discussions (based on readings, handouts, and your own skimming of the mass media) about science writing. Some classes will feature outside speakers, both science writers and scientists. Some classes will involve intensive review of the writing you've been doing. Some class discussions will focus on background issues that will help put science writing in its social context. In the weekly labs, you will write, write, and write some more. All major assignments will be media stories of one kind or another.

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Books and Reading

Required

- Deborah Blum and Mary Knudson, eds., *A Field Guide for Science Writers* (1997).
- Victor Cohn and Lew Cope, *News and Numbers: A Guide to Reporting Statistical Claims and Controversies in Health and Related Fields*, 2nd ed. (2001).
- Bookmark the following websites, some of which may require you to "register" (at no cost):
 - EurekAlert! (<http://www.eurekalert.org/>)
 - Science Daily (<http://www.sciencedaily.com/index.htm>)
 - New York Times (<http://www.nyt.com>), especially the Tuesday "Science Times" section (you will need to register, but there is no cost)
 - The Why Files (<http://whyfiles.news.wisc.edu/>)
 - BioMedNet Magazine (<http://news.bmn.com/magazine>) (you will need to register, but there is no cost)

On reserve at Mann Library

- Ted Anton and Rick McCourt, eds., *The New Science Journalists* (1995)
- and possibly others

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Assignments and grading

- [Weekly bulletin board posting](#)
- [News brief #1, due Monday, 15 September](#)
- [Speech #1, due Wednesday, 1 October](#)
- [News brief #2, due Wednesday, 8 October](#)
- [Speech #2, due Wednesday, 2 November](#)
- [Book review, due Wednesday, 3 December](#)
- [Feature:](#)
 - Proposal, due Monday, 20 October
 - Outline, due Wednesday, 29 October
 - Feature, due Wednesday, 19 November
 - Revised feature, due Friday, 12 December, 9:00 a.m.

Grading and related matters

Deadlines, Spelling, Facts, and Grammar

Papers are due in class. Papers will be graded down for being late. Spelling errors (including typos), incorrect names, and other factual errors will count against your grade. Grammatical problems will enter into the general evaluation of your assignments.

Grades

Some assignments will be graded; others will merely receive a check-mark. In general, grades reflect the following evaluation:

- A = Excellent story. Worthy of prominent play in a newspaper or magazine after minor editing. Reporting shows enterprise; writing shows flair.
- B = Good story. Publishable with little editing. Well-written, reported, and edited.
- C = Fair story, but one that requires substantial editing. A wordy, slow-paced story. A story that needs more reporting.
- D = Dull story. Unpublishable without rewriting or major surgery during editing. Careless or sloppy writing. Unsupported material.
- F = Unpublishable story. Poor in content or structure.

All assignments are required. Before calculating the final grade, I will drop your lowest scores. If you are missing more than 2 assignments (including ungraded ones), or if you are missing the final project, you will fail the course.

The final grade will be based on: major assignments and revisions (70%), other assignments, class participation, and professor's discretion (30%). I use my discretion mainly to help those who have shown real improvement and effort through the semester. Be warned, however, that I can use it in ways less beneficial when someone tries to slouch through the entire semester.

Cheating

As students at Cornell, you are all subject to the [University's Code of Academic Integrity](#). If you violate the code, you will be penalized severely (including potentially failing the course). The following comments on the Code apply *for this course only*.

(1) After you have written an article, you may ask classmates or friends to comment on it. Indeed, we encourage you to do so. Commenting is not editing; it is merely reading and saying, "What do you mean here?" or "This isn't clear," or "Did you check this fact?" or similar remarks. You may not ask for detailed grammatical, stylistic, or similar comments, which would constitute editing.

(2) You should use standard journalistic forms to cite the source of any information you use. You will learn these forms in class; common ones are: "According to Cornell geologist Frank Rhodes," "in an article recently published by Dean Hamer," or "a Theory Center spokesperson said."

Computers typing, and other mechanical details

See the copy of "Bruce Lewenstein's Online Idiosyncratic Style Guide for Student Papers," [available online](#). You are responsible for grammar and stylistic points listed in this document.

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Tentative Course Schedule

Note: in addition the readings listed, we may hand out stories in class, asking you to read them before the next class and to be ready to comment on them.

Week	Date	Topics, readings, assignments
1	1, 3 Sept	<p><i>What is science, what is the media, and so what is science in the mass media? Basic science news</i></p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gina Kolata, "Separating Research from News," NYTimes, 18 July 2000 • Scan the following websites <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ EurekAlert! (http://www.eurekalert.org/) ○ Science Daily (http://www.sciencedaily.com/index.htm) ○ New York Times (http://www.nytimes.com/pages/science/), especially the Tuesday "Science Times" section (you will need to register, but there is no cost) ○ The Why Files (http://whyfiles.news.wisc.edu/) ○ BioMedNet Magazine (http://www.biomednet.com/magazine/) (you will need to register, but there is no cost) • Review Bruce Lewenstein's Online Idiosyncratic Guide for Student Articles <p>LAB 1: News briefs</p>
2	8, 10 Sept	<p><i>Story structures; documenting with quotes and other sources</i> <i>[class notes]</i></p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidance on using quotations • Wisdom from the late Alton Blakeslee, AP science writer • Blum & Knudson, chs. 1-5, 27-31 <p>LAB 2: News briefs</p>
3	15, 17 Sept	<p><i>Reporting</i></p> <p>SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL: Covering NASA</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohn, chs. 1-5 (pp. 3-63) • Blum & Knudson, chs. 11, 12, (13), 14 <p>WEDNESDAY: GUEST SPEAKER</p> <p>LAB 3: Speeches</p> <p>DUE (Monday): News brief #1</p>

4	22, 24 Sept	<p><i>Simplifying and Explanations</i></p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simplifying • Blum & Knudson, ch. 10 <p>LAB 4: Explanations</p>
5	29 Sept, 1 Oct	<p><i>Simplifying and Explanations</i></p> <p>DUE (Wednesday): Speech #1</p> <p>LAB 5: Speeches</p>
6	6, 8 Oct	<p><i>Planning and reporting a feature story</i></p> <p>NO CLASS ON MONDAY (Yom Kippur)</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supplement: Anton & McCourt, chs. 2, 11, 16 • Supplement: Franklin, Mrs. Kelly's Monster <p>LAB: Features and Profiles</p> <p>DUE (Wednesday): News brief #2</p>
7	13, 15 Oct	<p><i>Profiles</i></p> <p>NO CLASS ON MONDAY (Fall Break)</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supplement: Anton & McCourt, chs. 3, 4 and 7 (profiles) <p>LAB: Features and Profiles</p> <p>BY FRIDAY: Fill out survey for next week (see next week's readings)</p>

8	20, 22 Oct	<p><i>Science literacy and the context for science writing</i></p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Science Board, "Public Attitudes and Public Understanding" 2002 (navigate to chapter 7, "Public Attitudes and Public Understanding") • Survey: Please send via e-mail to John Besley by 8:00 p.m. on Friday, 15 Oct. <p>LAB: Writing for the Web</p> <p>DUE (Monday): Feature proposal</p>
9	27, 29 Oct	<p><i>Writing about health, risk, and numbers</i></p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohn, chs. 6-9 • Blum & Knudson, chs. 16-26 (over next 3 weeks) • Notes on risk • Comments on media coverage of epidemiology and health <p>LAB: Working with numbers</p> <p>DUE (Wednesday): Feature outline</p>
10	3, 5 Nov	<p><i>Covering Controversies</i></p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supplement: Anton & McCourt, chs. 6, 8, 17 (cold fusion, monkey wars, breast cancer) <p>LAB: Environmental controversy</p> <p>DUE (Wednesday): Speech #2</p>
11	10, 12 Nov	<p><i>Covering the politics of science</i></p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supplement: Anton & McCourt chapters from last week -- see links above <p>LAB: Controversies</p>

12	17, 19 Nov	<p><i>Science on the Web</i></p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On the web <p>LAB: Cultural science writing (reviews)</p> <p>DUE (Wednesday): Feature</p>
13	24, 26 Nov	<p><i>Cultural science writing</i></p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blum & Knudson, chs. 6-8, 15 <p>NO LAB</p>
14	1, 3 Dec	<p><i>Putting all the pieces together: Science writing for the mass media</i></p> <p>LAB: Science writing for the mass media</p> <p>DUE (Wednesday): Book review</p>
Finals		<i>DUE: Revised feature, Friday, 12 December, 9:00 a.m.</i>

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