

Environmental Reporting -- G54.1188 (SERP)

Instructor: Dan Fagin

This aim of this class is to teach you how to produce good stories on environmental topics. By the time you finish, you should be able to smoothly incorporate all of the important elements of an environmental story -- data analysis, expert opinion, “real people” impact, and descriptive writing -- into a finished product that’s good enough to be accepted by a major magazine or newspaper. Writing is the focus of the course, but we’ll also spend some time getting grounded in the basics of environmental science and environmental issues, and we’ll do a little editing, too.

Course Structure

At the beginning we’ll focus mostly on the basics of environmental writing: finding stories, finding sources, the interview, and organizing stories. Then we’ll talk more about some of the special challenges of environmental writing, such as putting risk in perspective, communicating uncertainty, and explaining the basics of epidemiology, toxicology and environmental law. We’ll finish up by talking about how to package stories and how to sell yourself in the journalism marketplace. There will be writing assignments almost every week, plus a deadline story written in class and a concluding magazine-length article of 2,500-3,500 words that you will report and write outside of class. In past years, we’ve gotten several of the best of these stories published in newspapers or magazines, and we’ll try to make that happen this year, too. There may also be some guest speakers from the world of environmental journalism.

Discussion

I expect lots of discussion in class. Newsrooms are full of skeptical people who question everything, and that’s the way I’d like this class to work, too. No dubious assertion, especially by the professor, should go unchallenged. The best journalists take nothing for granted, and take everything with a grain of salt. So come prepared to contribute, to question, to argue -- and to be called upon if you’re too quiet.

Reading

You are not required to buy any texts for this course, but some weeks there will be one or two assigned readings that I will hand out. You’re expected to do the readings as assigned and on time, and to be prepared to talk about them.

Even more important than the assigned reading are the news articles that you find and read on your own. Reading environmental stories in the popular press is a required part of this course. I will set aside some time each class to dissect recently published environmental stories, and will assign one or two people each week to lead the discussion. When it’s your assigned week, you’re expected to write a two-page critique of a recently published story that you select. You’ll hand in your critique after the

discussion. (Please make copies of the article you found for everyone.) The point of this exercise is to ask and answer questions such as: Was the writing effective? Was the sourcing complete? How could the piece have been organized better? How would your reporting strategy have been different? So go to the library, or to Barnes & Noble, and start scanning at least some of the following publications for environmental articles: Time, Newsweek, US News, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Newsday, USA Today, and anything else you can get your hands on. Don't forget that general interest magazines such as Esquire, Harper's, Mother Jones, Smithsonian, Discovery, and Outside also frequently carry environmental stories, and so do women's magazines. There are also many specialty or trade publications, including E Magazine, Amicus Journal, Audubon and Chemical and Engineering News.

Grades

Grades shouldn't be the focus of a graduate school course, but since they're inescapable I'm going to base them on a combination of discussion and written work. One-third of your grade will be based on the quality of your participation in class, and the rest will be based on written assignments. As the term progresses, grades on written assignments will get progressively greater weight, with the final assignment worth one-third of your final grade. I'll be especially impressed if, as the term progresses, your writing shows that you are absorbing the course work.

Deadlines

They're also inescapable. Coping with deadlines is one of the most valuable lessons you are learning in SERP, because in the world of professional journalism you simply can't sustain a career if you blow deadlines. If you can't meet a deadline for a written assignment in this class, you're expected to have a very good reason. Even the best reason will not be good enough to avoid being marked down for lateness.

Scheduling and Attendance

The class will meet on Tuesday mornings from 10:30 to 1. I have a full-time job as Newsday's environment writer, and I cannot completely control my schedule. It's possible that I may have to reschedule some classes. If that happens, I'll do everything I can to let everyone know well ahead of time, and to pick a makeup day that fits with your schedules.

Because discussion is an important part of the course and we are going to move quickly through a lot of material, you're expected to show up for class each week. If there's some reason you can't, you should talk to me about it.

A Few Words About Your Internships

After a year of classes, some of you will be sorely tempted to devote most of your energy this term to your internship, if you have one. That's understandable in a way, but

you're cheating yourself if you blow off class work because of out-of-class involvements. You'll be in the workforce most of the rest of your life so there will be plenty of time to pull 14-hour days in the newsroom, five or six days a week. For a few more months, the work you're assigned for class has to be at least as high a priority as your internship work. How much time you spend on your internship is up to you, but please understand that your outside commitments will never be an acceptable excuse for late or low-quality class work.

Contacting Me, Contacting You

I regularly check both of my personal e-mail accounts, so you're welcome to contact me anytime at dfagin@optonline.net (best choice during evenings or weekends) or at dan.fagin@newsday.com (during working hours). If you prefer good old-fashioned interpersonal communication – and who doesn't? – I'll be available immediately after class for anyone who wants to talk, or please feel free call me at my office at (631) 843-3658. Please remember, though, that I'm not always easy to catch and I may not be able to talk if I'm on deadline.

It's also important that you give me your e-mail address, and that you check your account frequently – at least once a day, if possible – in case I need to reschedule a class or reach you about an assignment.

Course Sequence

We may deviate from this sequence as the term progresses, but I plan to divide the course work in the following way, more or less:

- Week 1. Overview
- Week 2. Sourcing
- Week 3. Organization
- Week 4. Digging
- Week 5: Communicating Risk/Meetings
- Week 6. Toxicology
- Week 7. Environmental law
- Week 8: Nature Writing
- Week 9. Computer Assisted Reporting and GIS/Meetings
- Week 10. Writing and reporting on deadline
- Week 11. Epidemiology
- Week 12. Advocacy and analysis/Meetings
- Week 13. Packaging environmental stories
- Week 14. Selling yourself in the marketplace/Conclusion