

Environmental Journalism
Course JRL 364Q
Fall 2002
M/W 5:45 p.m. – 7:05 p.m.
Humanities 110

“The ideal scientist thinks like a poet, works like a clerk and writes like a journalist”
E.O. Wilson

“If environmental evangelists have any unique skill, it’s the ability, with the blind cooperation of the press, to scare the daylights out of the public.”
W.C. Lowery

“There is a growing mismatch between the complex nature of reality and the way such problems are usually reported in the popular media, or perceived by the public.”
Steven H. Schneider

“The environment is everything but me.”
Albert Einstein

Instructors/Editors

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Course Summary

Right now, the world's population of mountain gorillas is larger than it has been in a decade. The number of Siberian Tigers is rising. There are great stories of hope for the environment to be told.

Yet, when you hear environmental news on the radio, or read it in a newspaper, many of these stories paint a picture of the natural world as in trouble. Fisheries are crashing around the globe. Air pollution from China is tainting U.S. streams and lakes. And true wilderness continues to disappear at alarming rates.

Both views on the natural world are at least partially true. Yet we hear relatively little of the problems, and less still of the successes.

The reality is that these issues are complex. Often, while covering an issue, there are successes *and* failures on which to report. The trick is to be able to tell the story in its full complexity, explaining all sides of the issue, while still making it accessible to the general public. The ability to do that is what's missing from much of the reporting now heard in the U.S.

But while environmental issues grow in importance, media coverage of those issues has dwindled. Research shows that few electronic news outlets devote more than 2 percent of their news holes to environmental coverage. And that 2 percent is usually crisis coverage, full of who did what, rather than thoughtful coverage, that provides context. While newspapers are doing somewhat better, writing about the environment accounts for only a handful of stories each day.

Yet in a recent survey conducted by NewsLab in Washington, D.C., 28 percent of the respondents said they would like a lot more news about the environment and 38 percent said they wanted somewhat more environmental coverage. That means 66 percent of those surveyed felt that they weren't getting enough environment news.

That in part is what environmental journalism is all about. While it's not the duty of every environmental reporter to rectify this inequity, it's important that they understand the context in which they are working. Through this class, we hope to provide that context. We also hope to expose you to some of the techniques used when writing environmental stories, as well as some of the resources to which one can turn.

This course will teach you how to find, report and write environmental news stories for newspapers, radio and magazines. Reading well makes for good writing, so throughout the course, we will read examples of top-notch environmental journalism.

Over the course of this semester, we want you to think of us as your editors. Call us when you get stuck. Bounce ideas off of us. Ask us for tips on who to call next. But most importantly, go where the story takes you.

Objectives

- To provide a better understanding of environmental journalism

- To teach skills needed to report and write environmental stories
- To critique and learn from the work of other environmental journalists
- To become better consumers of environmental news

Required Texts/Readings

Green Ink: An Introduction to Environmental Journalism by Michael Frome
Covering Key Environmental Issues, Radio Television News Directors' Foundation
Silent Spring by Rachel Carson
 Chapter 15 of William Zinsser's On Writing Well – Science, Technical and Nature Writing
 Assigned chapters from A Field Guide for Science Writers by Deborah Blum and Mary Knudson
 Assorted handouts

Other Suggested Reading

A Civil Action by Jonathan Harr
A Plague of Frogs by William Souder
The Control of Nature by John McPhee
Toxic Sludge is Good for You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry by John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton
Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream
 By Duany/Plater-Zybeck/Speck
Valuing the Earth by Daly/Townsend, editors
The End of Nature by Bill McKibben
The Song of the Dodo by David Quammen
Biodiversity by E.O. Wilson
 Any novel by Barbara Kingsolver
A Fierce Green Fire: The American Environmental Movement by Philip Shabecoff

Course Grade

This course for organization purposes will be divided into three parts: Crafting an Environmental Story; Types of Eco-stories; and Practicing Environmental Reporting. All assignments will be given a point value. The entire course is worth 400 points (There is an additional ten points of extra credit – see attached assignment sheet for breakdown of assignments and how grade will be calculated). Written assignments must be handed in on the due date. Deadlines are not negotiable. All stories must have more than one source. Any story with just one source will receive a zero grade. They must also not be longer than the assigned word count, and grammar and spelling mistakes will be a deduction. The

professors reserve the right to ask you to rewrite a piece, which is par for the course in any type of journalism.

Since reporting requires social skills, participation will account for 15 percent of your end-of-semester mark. To participate, you must attend class. A maximum of **three** absences will be allowed. Each additional absence over three will result in a 20-point deduction from your grade. The participation grade will be based on your involvement in each class. Being engaged during class discussions is worth 30 points. An additional 30 points will be based on whether or not you bring clippings to class meetings and become involved in the discussion of those clippings.

Part 1: Crafting an Environmental Story

Wednesday, Sept. 4: Introduction

Review syllabus. Introductions. What is journalism? Discuss role of journalists covering the environment. How are they unique? What makes environmental journalism different from other types of journalism? How do environmental journalists, who often care deeply about the issues, maintain balance?

Assignment: Read Green Ink Chapters 1-3. Read Chapter 15 of William Zinsser's "On Writing Well." Read Chapter 22 of "A Field Guide for Science Writers." For next class bring in one example of environmental journalism – from magazine, newspaper, or on-line publication and be ready to explain why it is a good example of environmental reporting. Notes on broadcast stories may also be brought in. Similar stories should be brought in for all remaining classes. None can be from the Times Union. We will spend a few minutes at the start of each class to discuss the more interesting clips. Also, you will have a major final writing project. Please start thinking of topics for your project. Otherwise, we will assign you a topic.

Monday, Sept. 9th: Environmental Issues 101

Writing about environmental topics often requires knowledge of the past. Nothing about the Hudson River can be properly written without knowing about Storm King. A story on a polluting factory cannot be reported without knowledge of the Clean Water and Clean Air Acts. Judith Enck, once head of the New York Public Interest Research Group and now a policy advisor with New York state Attorney General Eliot Spitzer's Environmental Protection Bureau, will discuss environmental history. An attorney from Spitzer's office will also discuss environmental law.

Assignment: Due Wednesday, Sept. 11: each student should collect clips and present to class how the environment was covered in days following Sept. 11. Each student will sign up for a significant event in environmental history or piece of legislation. Due Wednesday, Sept. 25th: one page synopsis of assigned topic, including sources, Web sites and who to contact for more information. Must be single-spaced. (30 points).

Wednesday, Sept. 11th: Special Topic: Environmental reporting post Sept. 11

Students present what they've found on Sept. 11th. What questions would you have asked as an environmental reporter covering Sept. 11th? What other story ideas were possible? Do you see any holes in how the mainstream media covered this story?

Assignment: For class on Monday, write up three story ideas (15 points). One of these ideas will be used for the final project topic. Be prepared to sell at least one idea to the class. Each one should be about a paragraph in length. Read Green Ink, Chapters 12-13, 17. Read "Lax Security Exposes lethal Chemical Supplies," Carl Prine, Pittsburgh Tribune-Review.

Monday, Sept. 16th: NO CLASS

Wednesday, Sept. 18th: Story ideas...where they come from and how to pitch them

Frank Allen, the ex-environmental reporter for the Wall Street Journal once said environmental stories don't break, they ooze. Being an enterprising reporter is the bread-and-butter of the environmental beat. You must be able to dig up stories – anywhere. This class will discuss how, and explain the best way to sell them to your editor.

Assignment: Read Green Ink Chapter 15. Read "How to Sell Your Story," by Len Reed, environmental team leader, The Oregonian. Read and review handouts. Type up one additional story idea for class Monday, Sept. 23rd (5 points). One of your story ideas, selected by your professors, will be used for your 600-word story and can be built upon for your final paper. You will begin researching the idea in class next week. If you don't like the choice made by the professors, feel free to argue for a better idea.

Monday, Sept. 23rd: Now that you have the idea, where do you begin?

Class will meet in media lab today. Story ideas handed in Monday, Sept. 16th will be returned. Your project idea will be researched in media lab.

Assignment: Hand in on Wednesday a refined story idea and list of possible interview subjects and questions for selected story (10 points). Read Green Ink, Chapter 14.

Wednesday, Sept. 25th: Interviewing: how to get the real story

Rule #1: Be prepared. It's the only way not to get spun. Good interviews breed good stories. Make sure you know who you are talking to, and what their interest is before you start to ask questions. In class we will watch "Interviewing: New Questions, Better Stories."

Assignment: Interview at least two of your interview subjects identified during your research last week. Write 600-word story to be handed in at start of class Wednesday, October 2nd (50 points). Read Green Ink, Chapter 11.

Monday, Sept. 30: From Reporting to Writing

Now that you have a notebook full of notes, how do you organize it into a story? In class, we will watch "Framing a story: What is it really about?" Review of journalism basics. Lede, nut graf, etc. How to organize the story. How to use quotes.

Assignment: Green Ink, Chapter 6. Also, read “Writers at Work: The process approach to News writing,” from the Poynter Institute.

Wednesday, October 2nd: Infusing a story with context

Watch part of Bill Moyers documentary on the Hudson River. If you read the newspaper or watch TV all you would know is PCBs and GE when it comes to the Hudson. Moyers does a great job of pointing out past battles, providing context. What is context? Why do we need it in a story, especially an environmental story?

Assignment: 600-word story due. Read Green Ink, Chapter 16. Read Cappiello’s Firefly piece in Times Union.

Monday, October 7th : Translation

To translate science for the lay public you have to understand the subject intimately. A single word change can lead to an inaccuracy. Translation in environmental reporting is paramount. Go through several examples of good and poor translation in class.

Assignment: Translate textbook page into 300-word story (30 points). Due Monday, October 14th. Read first chapter of Dirt: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth.

Part 2: Types of Eco-stories

Wednesday, October 9th: Descriptive Writing

Watch part of Microcosmos. In class, students will be asked to write a short piece describing a scene in Microcosmos. Descriptive writing is one of the primary tools used to translate technical topics into a palatable form for the lay public.

Assignment: Over next week, go to Corning Preserve, Pine Bush – or seek out other type of nature experience and write 400-word essay (35 points) Due: Monday, October 21st.

Monday, October 14th: Breaking News

Deadline drills. Present students with several news releases. In class will write several short stories. Will hand in at end of class.

Assignment: Work on Descriptive Writing piece.

Wednesday, October 16th: Mock Press Conference

Press conference on surprise topic. 500-word story on conference due no later than 5:00 p.m. Thursday, October 17th (40 points). E-mail to either Prof. Willman or Cappiello.

Assignment: Story idea for 1500-word written piece, or five-to-eight minute radio piece, written as a one-page pitch letter (25 points). Can be any of the types of stories we have covered, or at best, a mixture of them. Pitch letter due October 28th. The final piece is due Wednesday, November 20th. Also, read Green Ink Chapter 17 for example of pitch letter. Read Chapter 11 of “A Field Guide for Science Writers.”

Monday, October 21st: The Profile

Readers can be tricked into reading about science if the tale is told through the scientist. Passion for environmental issues can come alive through the environmental activist. Politics can read like a trashy romance novel when it is

portrayed through the politically powerful. This is called the profile. It's a device that can stand on it's own, or just as aptly be used in longer enterprise and investigative pieces.

Assignment: Read "George Divoky's Planet" by Darcy Frey.

Wednesday, October 23rd: Political reporting/Legislation tracking

Budgets, legislation, the Green Party: these are just as much a part of the environmental beat as science, especially in a state Capitol. For example, President George W. Bush's proposed weakening of environmental laws once again landed environmental news on the front-page. We will invite movers and shakers in environmental politics to class this day.

Assignment: Read Green Ink Chapter 10.

Monday, October 28th: Enterprise Reporting

What is enterprise? How does it differ from breaking news? Where do the ideas come from?

Assignment: Read Pulitzer-Prize winning series "The Shipbreakers" for Wednesday.

Wednesday, October 30th: Investigative Reporting

Robert Freeman, expert on the Freedom on Information Act gives overview of law.

Assignment: Bring in an editorial or opinion piece dealing with an environmental issue. Be prepared to discuss what you think the goals of the piece were, and how effective it was in achieving those goals. What were its strengths and weaknesses?

Monday, November 4th: Editorial/Opinion Writing

Fred LeBrun, Times Union columnist talks about writing and your opinions.

Assignment: Read editorial pieces handed out in class. Read Chapter 15 of "A Field Guide for Science Writers." Read storytelling handouts.

Wednesday, November 6th: Radio Writing and/or Telling Stories Visually

Forget the inverted pyramid. We're talking linear now. Writing for radio is writing for the ear, and that means telling a story the old fashioned way, the way of Aristotle. Each story has a beginning, a middle and an end. And that's a radical departure from the ways of print. It's also a style that lends itself well to the new medium of Internet reporting. We'll discuss this style. Depending on interest, this week we may also discuss photojournalism and putting environmental science into graphics.

Assignment: Readings TBA

Part 3: Practicing Environmental Reporting

Monday, November 11th: Types of Environmental Reporting

There's more to environmental writing than daily newspaper reporting and NPR's Living on Earth. Environmental writers write for children's magazines, specialized science publications and trade journals. We'll examine each of these mediums and how they differ from the mainstream.

Assignment: Read Green Ink Chapter 7. Read "It's a Jungle Out There," Kevin Carmody, Columbia Journalism Review, May/June 1995.

Wednesday, November 13th: Advocacy Journalism

Being an environmental reporter in any major media outlet is akin to being branded. In today's media culture, the environmental reporter is sometimes viewed as an advocate, writing for the cause. It's true many environmental reporters would consider themselves environmentalists. (And business writers are Capitalists, yet that's not held against them) But while some write and inject their feelings into the story (advocacy journalists) others try to stick to the facts. How do you find balance on such an emotional and passionate beat? Dick Beamish, editor of Adirondack Explorer invited to speak.

Assignment: Read Green Ink Chapters 4 and 5. Read Bill McKibben's Future Shock. Read "Air Condition: Bush, pollution and hysteria," by Gregg Easterbrook, The New Republic.

Monday, November 18th: Editing

How do you edit yourself? How do you read other environmental journalism critically? We will discuss the editing process in class.

Assignment: Continue working on final paper. Due on Wednesday. Bring two copies.

Wednesday, November 20th: Editing

Entire class will be spent editing another classmate's final paper.

Monday, November 25th: Silent Spring

Be prepared to discuss Rachel Carson's pioneering book.

Assignment: While at home over the Thanksgiving holiday, bring back one piece of environmental journalism from your local newspaper, and one story idea from your neighborhood. Also, eat too much turkey or cranberry dressing.

Wednesday, November 27th: NO CLASS

Monday, December 2nd: Public Relations

Jennifer Post, lead spokeswoman for the DEC and other official spokespeople discuss dealing with media, and give ways to schmooze the spokespeople that can help you find the story. With major companies now launching massive media campaigns, and environmental journalists being called on to cover them, understanding this side of the business is imperative. Will hand out several state press releases, and guide class through how to compose a news bulletin.

Assignment: Rework and rewrite long pieces (10 points) Due date: Monday, December 9th.

Wednesday, December 4th: Environmental Justice

How to look at stories from an environmental justice angle. Why it's important. Optional field trip: local environmental activists Aaron Mair and Anne Rabe take class on toxic tour.

Assignment: Read "Greens get real" by Salim Muwakkil. Also read "Environmentalism or Ideology? Inner city activists talk pollution, push social agenda" by Christopher Foreman, SEJ Journal

Monday, December 9th: Breaking into the biz

For Michael Frome it happened by chance.

Assignment: Interview one environmental reporter, and report to class Wednesday how they got into the field. Professors Willman and Cappiello can provide names, if needed.

Wednesday, December 11th: The future of environmental reporting/Environmental Economics

Will Oprah start covering the environment? A discussion of where we are, and where we are going. Prof. Willman also talks about asking economic questions when covering environmental stories. Fill out course evaluations.

Assignment: In the next six months, try to freelance a piece.