

**ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM: REPORTING ABOUT SCIENCE, POLICY  
AND PUBLIC HEALTH**  
**Environ/NRE 304**

Instructors:

Emilia Askari, Staff Writer, *Detroit Free Press*, 313-223-4461 (work, Mon-Weds);  
248-546-5783 (home); emilia.askari@alumni.brown.edu

Julie Halpert, Independent Journalist, 734-769-7780 (work); 734-995-0920 (home);  
jhalpert@comcast.net.

Meets Fridays from 9:00 to noon in 1064 Dana. Office Hours: By appointment.  
Both instructors are available for consultations by telephone and e-mail.

Objectives: To introduce students to basic research and writing skills needed to cover current and emerging environmental issues. To show students how to critique environmental journalism. This class focuses on journalistic writing, a genre that emphasizes succinct, non-fiction articles. Journalistic writing is rooted in facts and differs markedly in style from academic writing. The course will feature:

1. In-class discussion of readings.
2. A series of guest speakers including prize-winning journalists and leaders in science, business and environmental activism.
3. A field trip to the Environmental Protection Agency's Mobile Sources Lab in Ann Arbor.
4. Tools for reporting and writing about environmental issues.

Assignments:

A profile of a person whose work impacts the environment or associated public health problems: 600 words. A list of profile ideas is due in class September 12th. A status report is due in class on September 19th. Three copies of a first draft of the profile are due in class on September 26<sup>th</sup>. Three copies of the final draft are due in class on October 17<sup>th</sup>.

A final paper: A magazine article of approximately 2,000 words on an emerging environmental or public health issue of interest to the general public. Story ideas are due in class on October 24th. A written status report is due in class on October 31<sup>st</sup>. Three copies of the first draft of the article are due in class on November 7th. Two copies of the final draft are due in the instructor's box no later than 5 p.m. on December 15<sup>th</sup>.

Plus...

A series of shorter assignments:

\* Developing a list of story ideas from a class tour of an Environmental Protection Agency lab in Ann Arbor. List of ideas due October 3rd.

\* Developing a list of computer-based story ideas due October 31st. Please submit by e-mail to emilia.askari@alumni.brown.edu.

\* Attending a meeting of a local city council, planning board or any other local government entity of the student's choice. Writing a 200-word story on a subject that came up at the meeting and relates to science, public health or the environment. Possible subjects include garbage, toxic waste, recycling plans, urban sprawl, wetlands protection and pollution of the local groundwater. Due in class on November 14th.

Students periodically will critique their fellow students' work. Extensive re-writing of major assignments is required. Students should expect their papers to be heavily edited. Grades will be based on overall improvement.

All assignments should be typed and double-spaced with large margins; conform to the standard rules of English grammar and spelling; and be written to the stipulated length.

Because we seek to simulate a real newsroom environment, ***late assignments will not be accepted. Students will be required to meet every deadline.***

Plagiarism will not be tolerated.

We intend to run class sessions as an informal dialogue. Class participation is essential. The ability to ask relevant questions is a key skill of a good reporter.

Assignments will be judged on:

\* Use of color, description and anecdotes to hook reluctant readers. Originality is a plus.

\* Fairness. Ability to see all sides of an issue and adequately present them.

\* Organization. Ability to quickly synthesize the most important information, and then embellish it.

\* Accuracy.

What constitutes good journalistic writing will be discussed at the first class meeting.

Grading Criteria:

25 percent in-class participation

20 percent profile

20 percent short assignments

35 percent final assignment

Prerequisites:

The only requirements for this course are curiosity, perseverance, attention to detail, adherence to deadline and a modest agility with written words. If you complete the readings, attend class, and work hard you will do well, regardless of your background in journalism, science, public health or the environment.

## **Reading List**

*Required:*

*Course Pack.* A sampling of magazine and newspaper articles selected by the instructors, available at Accu-Copy on William Street.

Selections from *The Green Reader, Essays Toward a Sustainable Society*, edited by Andrew Dobson

Selections from *The Associated Press Guide to Newswriting*, by Rene J. Cappon

*Recommended for occasional browsing:*

*The New York Times*, especially the Science Times section, which runs on Tuesdays.

*The Atlantic*

*Outside*

*The Wall Street Journal*

A local newspaper such as the *Ann Arbor News*, *Detroit Free Press* or *The Detroit News*

*SEJournal*, a quarterly publication of the Society of Environmental Journalists

*Environment Writer*, a monthly publication

## **COURSE SYLLABUS**

### **Environmental Journalism: Reporting about Science, Policy and Public Health**

Class One. Friday, September 5th. **Introduction.** A brief look at classic environmental literature. What makes for high caliber environmental journalism? Bias: is it ever acceptable for environmental and science journalists to hold opinions about the issues they cover? How have customs about incorporating opinion into journalism changed over the years? What are the current criteria for separating story ideas from junk? How do journalists develop an idea into a story? How should the public judge environment and science news? How much do corporate representatives control news? How much do they spend trying? Changes in media ownership and how that might affect science and environment news. Skepticism and journalists. Trade associations and how reporters use them. How environmental groups use the media to convey green messages. Pranks. Demonstrations. Exaggerations. Relative budgets of environmental groups versus corporate public relations departments. The growth of the environmental justice movement and strife among environmentalists. Guest speakers: Matt Neely of Republic Services and Mike Garfield, director of The Ecology Center. Instructors: Both.

Class Two. Friday, September 12<sup>th</sup>. **Bridging the Cultural Gap: Scientists versus Journalists.** Why scientists don't trust reporters. The culture clash. Why the ones who like to talk to reporters may not be the best ones for reporters to interview. Who gets funded? Who gets to become a media star in a lab coat? Before this class, students should browse from the course pack sample profiles from *Michigan Woman*, *The Detroit Free Press* and *Outside* magazine. Required readings from the course pack are "Thayrone Flap Raises Issues of Conduct on Public-Radio Shows," "Network Earth: Advocacy, Journalism and the Environment," by Teya Ryan, "Scientist as Journalist," "Report Science Carefully," "Chlorine, Cornucopia or Pandora's Box," by Karl Leif Bates, "Probable Fact and Probable Junk," by Victor Cohn and "Reporting Science Means Looking for Cautionary Signals" by Boyce Rensberger. Students should come to class with three ideas for a profile of a person who has impacted science or the environment. Each idea should be described in a single, typed paragraph. Guest speakers: Karl Bates, Director of Communications for The University of Michigan's Life Sciences Institute and former Science Writer for The Detroit News and Ann Arbor News, and Gilbert Omenn, Professor of Internal Medicine, Human Genetics and Public Health at The University of Michigan Medical School and the School of Public Health and former chair of the Presidential/Congressional Commission on Risk Assessment and Risk Management. Instructor: Halpert.

Class Three. Friday, September 19. **Reporting About The Great Lakes.** The largest reserve of fresh water in the world is full of problems and stories. Get a quick primer about how to report about them from experts visiting campus for a meeting of the International Joint Commission, set up by the U.S. and Canada to manage the lakes. We

also will spend time in this class discussing techniques of reporting and journalistic writing. Each student must submit a written status report of no longer than one page describing sources contacted for the profile assignment, questions asked, and important or surprising information received. Any problems encountered in the reporting process also should be included. Before this class, students should read from the course pack selections from *The Late Great Lakes* by William Ashworth, "Water Pushing the Limits" by William K. Stevens of *The New York Times*, "Writing About Science and the Environment" by Jim Detjen, "Down Home Tips for Green Reporting" by Betsy Marston, "Writing Clearly" and "Mercury is a Serious Catch to Eating Fish," by Jane E. Allen of *The Los Angeles Times*. Also read a selection from *Silent Spring* in *The Green Reader*. Guest speakers will include Frank Bevacqua of the International Joint Commission and Lester Graham, a producer for National Public Radio's Great Lakes Radio Consortium. Pick up directions to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Mobile Sources lab, where the next class will be held. Instructor: Askari.

Class Four. Friday, September 26<sup>th</sup>. **Wading Through the Government Bureaucracy.** Are government representatives any more reliable than the rest? How can we spot their agendas? Class will meet at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Mobile Sources lab in Ann Arbor at 9 a.m. Students will meet with EPA experts, who will discuss a variety of high priority automobile regulation initiatives. As they tour the lab, students will scout for story leads. Three copies of the first draft of the profile due. Before this class, students should browse, "Mr. Bottom Line," from *Onearth* magazine. Required readings from the course pack are: "How the EPA Pollutes the News" by Jim Sibbison, "Environmental Journalism in an Age of Backlash," by Kevin Carmody and "UPS Turns to Fuel-Cell Cars," by Poornima Gupta. Instructor: Halpert.

Class Five. Friday, October 3. **The Special Vulnerability of Children: Reporting About Lead and other Toxins that Target the Young.** The history behind regulations that are based on adult models. Why it's so difficult to create more protective measures for children. Issue ennui. How journalists try to prompt change. As a subtext of this class, we'll also talk about ethics and how journalists gather information from the Internet. List of story ideas from EPA lab tour due. Three copies of second draft of profile due. Browse "Questions That Journalists May Want to Ask Authors of Pesticide Studies" from *Pesticides and the Press*. Required course pack readings are: "Teens Before Their Time" from *Time* magazine, selections from *A Journalist's Resource Guide*, the news release from the Center for the Study of American Business, "Lead and the House of the Butterflies" pages 89 through 92 from *Trust Us We're Experts*, "Strings Attached" by Gwen Shaffer, "The Times Bomb" from *Newsweek*, "How the Internet Creates New Ways to Tell Health Stories," The Poynter Institute's "Guide for the Principled Journalist," "How to Search the Web for Information," and selections from "Wired Journalist." Guests will include Glenn Brown, co-chair of the Michigan Lead Partnership. Instructor: Askari.

Class Six. Friday, October 10th. **The Business Beat and Environment Reporting.** Tapping the financial impacts of environmental rules for the business reader. Is there environmental news in the numbers? Do stories produced for a business audience necessarily have an anti-conservation slant? Using the auto industry as an example of coverage of one crucial industry. Three copies of first draft of final paper due. Before class, students should browse the bios of Keith Naughton and Jeffrey Ball, which were written by a company that services public relations executives, and also peruse their clips, Jeffrey Ball's "Rocky Road, After Long Détente, GM, Green Groups Are at Odds Again," and "Green Dream: Hydrogen Fuel May Be Clean But Getting It Here Looks Messy," and Keith Naughton's "Ford Goes for the Green," "The Unstoppable SUV," and "Why Ford Came Clean." Required readings from the course pack are "Greens and Greenbacks," by Emily T. Smith from *Media and the Environment*, "Companies Turn to Novel Tactics to Thwart Negative News Stories," by Wade Lambert and Elizabeth Jensen and "Packaging the Beast," pages 99 to 104 in *Trust Us, We're Experts*. Guests: Keith Naughton, Detroit Bureau Chief of *Newsweek* magazine and Jeffrey Ball, staff reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*. Instructor: Halpert.

Class Seven. Friday, October 17th. **Bioterrorism: Strategies for Covering An Attack.** As we stage a mock bioterrorism attack, gaps in our preparations as a society will quickly become apparent. What can journalists do to close these gaps? How can we inform the public without creating panic? The pros and cons of getting immunized. The likelihood of an attack. Are we hyping this threat, minimizing it, or playing it somewhere in between? Three copies of second draft of profile due. Before this class, read selections from the course pack "Where to Get Information," "Access Versus Security, Removal of Records Puts Openness at Risk" by Jennifer LaFleur in the IRE Journal and "The Anthrax Enigma" by Sherry Ricchiardi. Also, from *The Associate Press Guide to Newswriting*, read chapter 8, "Quotes: Your Words or Mine?" Guests will include Dr. Sandro Cinti of The University of Michigan's School of Public Health. Instructor: Askari.

Class Eight. Friday, October 24<sup>th</sup>. **Environment, Science and the Political Process.** How party politics shape the environmental agenda. The compromises, the deals, made on environmental issues and how to get behind the scenes. Due: one-paragraph descriptions of two ideas for your final paper. Before this class, students should browse, "Top Dogs," by Jill Davis and Jason Best in the course pack. Also in the course pack, peruse the various versions of articles on Christine Todd Whitman's departure from EPA, looking for differences in style: "The Green Old Party," by William K. Reilly, "EPA Chief Whitman to Depart, in Pre-election Bush Team Shift" by Jeanne Cummings and John J. Fialka, "Often Isolated, Whitman Quits as EPA Chief," and "Color-Coded Choices for New EPA Nominee," both by Katharine Q. Seelye, "Next EPA Pick to Face Tough Policy Calls Amid Tense Election Campaign," and "Battle Brews over EPA Post As Top Contenders Emerge." Required readings in the course pack are: "A Win for Clean Air" from the *Environmental Forum* and "To Govern is to Choose: Risk Assessment and Environmental Justice," pages 120 to 127. Also, from *The Associated Press Guide to*

*Newswriting*, read chapter 9, “Color: Dip Your Brush in Small Details.” Guests: Professor Walter Rosenbaum, Visiting Professor, Program on the Environment and Political Science Professor at The University of Florida at Gainesville, Lana Pollock, former state senator and President of the Michigan Environmental Council and Mike Johnston, environmental specialist for the Michigan Manufacturers Association. Instructor: Halpert.

Class Nine. Friday, October 31<sup>st</sup>. **The Smoke Over Nuclear Power:** A closer look at coverage of one hot story. Each student must submit a written status report of no longer than one page describing sources contacted for the final assignment, questions asked, and important or surprising information received. Any problems encountered in the reporting process should also be included. List of computer-based story ideas due. From *The Green Reader*, please browse “Soft Energy Paths” by Amory Lovins. Required readings from the course pack are selections from *The Reporter’s Environmental Handbook*, selections from *A Reporter’s Guide To Yucca Mountain*, “Nuclear Power Coverage Focused Morbidly on Risk” from *The Los Angeles Times* and selections from *The Toledo Blade*. Guests: Jim Detjen of the Knight Center for Environmental Journalism at Michigan State University and Tom Henry of the *Toledo Blade*. Instructor: Askari.

Class Ten. Friday, November 7th. **The Global Picture.** Why can’t journalists do a good job with the biggest stories, the ones that ooze? How can we improve coverage of issues such as climate change, biodiversity and ozone depletion? Making sense of conflicting experts. Selling editors on slow-moving stories. Giving Mom and Pop a reason to care. Also, how does the quality of information conveyed by the media on these issues affect public understanding of them? Three copies of first draft of final paper due. Before this class, students should browse from the course pack “Times Science Reporter Stevens Singled Out by Warming Skeptics Group,” “Greening Earth Society Launches Virtual Climate Alert,” “Virutal Climate Alert” and “A Skeptic Asks: Is It Getting Hotter or Is It Just the Computer Model” by William K. Stevens. Required readings from the course pack are: “Forget Nature. Even Eden Is Engineered” by Andrew Revkin of *The New York Times*, “Why Important Stories Are Underreported,” “Expert Opinion on Climate Change” by William D. Nordhaus, and “Report by the EPA Leaves Out Data on Climate Change” by Andrew Revkin and Katharine A. Seelye of *The New York Times*. Guest: Dean Rosina Bierbaum of the School of Natural Resources and Environment. Instructor: Askari.

Class Eleven. Friday, November 14th. **Covering Cancer and Public Health Issues: Unveiling the Environmental Culprits.** Understanding emerging environmental dangers. Learning how to explain relative risk of various chemicals implicated in cancer and other health problems. When is an article considered alarmist? Evaluating first person pieces: are they more effective in telling the story? Story from public meeting due. From the course pack, browse the various versions of “What Do Patients Want,” by Julie Halpert from *Newsweek*, including correspondence from Newsweek bureau chief Keith

Naughton, for a discussion on editing (There are 26 pages in total, so just peruse them). Also browse from the course pack “What Causes Cancer: Can Science Find the Missing Link?” “Experts Strive to Put Diseases in Proper Perspective” and “Putting a Price Tag on the Priceless.” Required readings from the course pack: "Our Daughter Came Back to Life," from *Parents* magazine, by Julie Halpert, "Health Effects," from *Chemicals, the Press and the Public*, "Toxic Emissions: Cancer Rates Soar in High-Discharge Area," by Scott Streater and "Overdosing on Health Risks," by Marcia Angell. In this class, students will critique the first drafts of each other's final papers. Guest: Gina Kolata, science reporter for *The New York Times*. Instructor: Halpert.

Class Twelve. Friday, November 21<sup>st</sup>. **Urban Sprawl: the Environmental Costs of Migrating to the Suburbs.** Why is sprawl such a controversial issue? What are the short-term and long-term costs of development far from urban centers? What are some initiatives to curb urban sprawl, or mitigate its consequences? Before this class students should read from the course pack: "Suburban Sprawl, American's Most Important Environmental Issue" pages 9 through 15, "Environmental Costs," from *Covering Urban Sprawl, Rethinking the American Dream*, pages 9 through 13, "Militants Linked to Torched Houses," by Maryanne George and "Anti-Sprawl ELF Takes Credit for Torching Homes." Also, from *The Green Reader*, read "A Possible Utopia" by Andre Gorz. Guests: Chris Cook, producer of the award-winning documentary, *The Sprawling of America*; State Senator Liz Brater and a developer. Instructor: Halpert.

Class Twelve. Friday, December 5: **Are Environmental Journalists Asking the Right Questions?/ Marketing Yourself as an Environmental Journalist.** Finding a job or freelancing environment and science stories: What sells. What doesn't and why. Targeting the right markets. How to develop a story idea that catches an editor's attention. Students will be working in class on story ideas and should come to class with an idea for a future article. Course evaluations will be completed. Before this class, students should browse from the course pack freelancing guidelines from *Ranger Rick*, *Sierra*, *National Wildlife*, *E Magazine*, and *Smithsonian* and selections on Keith Bradsher: "A Driven Reporter," by Charles Butler and "Ask a Reporter." Also browse, "The Case for Environmental Journalism," by Keith Schneider, "Networking" from *Finding a Job in Today's Market*, "The News Delivery Roulette," by Ken Yamada and "Take it From the Bottom," from *The Poynter Report*. Required readings: "Sight" by Pamela Alexander. Also read "Green Education" by Aldous Huxley from *The Green Reader*. Guest: Kelly Thayer, former student in this class, former environment reporter for the *Wausau Daily Herald* and current Transportation Project Manager for the Michigan Land Use Institute. Instructors: Both.

Final drafts of final papers must be dropped in the instructors' box by 5 p.m. December 15<sup>th</sup>.