

Journalism 824 Section 1 Fall 2003 3 credits Health and Science Writing

Meets Tuesdays 6 to 8:50 p.m. in Room 236 Communication Arts Building, Michigan State University School of Journalism

Instructor: Jim Detjen, Knight Chair in Journalism

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The purpose of this course is to learn about excellence in science, health and medical writing. Students will learn about the history of science, health and medical writing. They will learn how the worlds of science and journalism differ and why there sometimes are conflicts between the two. They will learn about the scientific process; what makes science and medical news; how to translate jargon; how to evaluate scientific and health risks; ethical issues and other issues.

This is a both a discussion and writing course. Students will be asked to read prior to class a number of examples of science and medical journalism and to be prepared to discuss them in class. Students will also be expected to produce a number of pieces that will be critiqued by the instructor and fellow students. All assignments must be double-spaced, conform to standard rules of English grammar and AP style, and be written to the assigned length. Students will be asked to rewrite assignments, when needed.

The class will include a variety of guest speakers from the news media, universities, museums and other organizations. Students will also visit the Abrams Planetarium, the MSU Museum and other sites. If the logistics can be arranged, the class will also take a longer field trip, perhaps to Chicago.

We will use as our textbooks The Best American Science Writing 2002 edited by Matt Ridley; A Field Guide for Science Writers by Deborah Blum and Mary Knudson; and a resource guide of readings that will be available at Budget Printing, 974 Trowbridge, Trowbridge Plaza, East Lansing beginning on Aug. 30. We will also read and discuss science, medical and health articles in The New York Times. I especially encourage you to read the "Science Times" section, which is published each Tuesday. Students are also encouraged to bring to class copies of outstanding science, health and medical journalism to discuss with members of the class.

Late assignments will NOT be accepted. In the journalism world deadlines are absolute. At some point the presses roll or the newscast airs, whether or not you slept late, have a cold or the computer ate your disk. Professional journalists make contingency plans for late nights, colds and eaten disks. The only way to teach this is to require it of you.

Textbooks:

A Field Guide for Science Writers by Deborah Blum and Mary Knudson (Oxford University Press).

The Best American Science Writing 2002 edited by Matt Ridley (Ecco)

JRN 824 Resource Guide.

The New York Times

Recommended: News and Numbers by Victor Cohn; On Writing Well by William Zinsser (Harper & Row); The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual (Perseus Books).

Assignments:

Students will be assigned to read a variety of articles about science, health and medicine.

They will also be graded upon:

- 1) Leading a class discussion about assigned readings for one of the classes (10% of grade)
- 2) A two to three page press release and a one-page outline of a strategy for media coverage (10 %)
- 3) A three to four page article about a science, health or medical topic that could be published in a daily newspaper (15%)
- 4) A longer article (six to 10 pages) about a scientific, health or medical topic that could be published in a magazine (25%)
- 5) A one-page query letter (5%)
- 6) Lead a class discussion about a current issue in science, health or medical writing and write a paper summarizing the issues. Turn in a six to eight page paper on the topic. (20%)
- 7) Class participation, attendance and in-class activities (15%).

Students will be allowed to rewrite assignments. The final grade will be based upon the average grades of the original and the revised article. Rewrites are due one week after the original has been turned back to the student.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:

Professor Jim Detjen joined the MSU Journalism School faculty in January 1995 as the Knight Chair in Journalism, the nation's only endowed chair in environmental reporting. He is also the Director of MSU's Knight Center for Environmental Journalism.. He is a full professor with tenure. Prior to joining MSU's faculty, he spent 21 years as a professional newspaper reporter and editor. He covered local government, police, agriculture, science and the environment for The Poughkeepsie (N.Y.) Journal from 1973 to 1977. He covered science and environmental issues, worked as an investigative reporter and wrote editorials at The Courier-Journal in Louisville, Kentucky from 1978 to 1982. He covered scientific, environmental and medical issues and served as a part-time editor on the science, state, city, national and foreign desks of The Philadelphia Inquirer from 1982 to 1994. He has also worked as a part-time correspondent for The New York Times and his work has been published in The Washington Post, The Chicago Tribune, The Detroit Free Press, The Boston Globe and many other newspapers and magazines. He has won more than 45 state and national awards for his reporting, including the George Polk Award, the National Headliner

Award for investigative reporting, the Thomas Stokes Award for natural resources reporting (twice) and the Edward Meeman Award for environmental reporting (five times). His work has been nominated eight times for a Pulitzer Prize and he has been a finalist three times. In 1997 Earth Times named Professor Detjen as one of the 100 most influential people on environment and sustainable development issues in the world. In 1998 he was awarded the International Green Pen Award for his worldwide contributions to environmental journalism. In 1999 he was given the “outstanding teacher” award by students at MSU’s Journalism School.

He is the founding president of the U.S. Society of Environmental Journalists and from 1994 to 2000 served as the president of the International Federation of Environmental Journalists. He has a B.S. degree from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y. where he was the managing editor of his college newspaper and a M.S. degree with honors from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

He has also taught at Drexel University in Philadelphia, Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. and he has lectured at Oxford, Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Princeton, Stanford, M.I.T., the University of Michigan, the University of Texas, the University of Tennessee, the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia and many other universities. In 2002 he was a Fulbright Scholar at Nankai University in Tianjin, China.

Professor Detjen and his wife Connie are the parents of two sons, Chris and Brad.

Plagiarism: Students are expected to do their own work on all assignments. Students who cheat, fabricate or plagiarize will receive a 0.0 on the assignment and may fail this course. Plagiarism is defined as presenting another person’s work or ideas as one’s own. The School of Journalism subscribes to the Guidelines on Academic Dishonesty specified in the General Student Regulations and in the All-University Policy on Integrity of Scholarship and Grades, which are described in SPARTAN LIFE: STUDENT RESOURCE GUIDE AND HANDBOOK and in the “General Procedures and Regulations” section of the UNIVERSITY ACADEMIC PROGRAM publication.

Accommodations for Disabilities: If you are a student with a disability who requires reasonable accommodations, please call the OPHS Disability Resource Center at 353-9642 (voice) or 355-1293 (TTY).

Observing a Major Religious Holiday: You may make up course work missed to observe a major religious holiday only if you make arrangements in advance with the instructor.

Missing Class to Participate in a Required Activity: If you must miss class to participate in a required activity for another course, provide the instructor with a adequate advanced notice and a written authorization from the faculty member of the other course.

SCHEDULE OF CLASS ACTIVITIES AND ASSIGNMENTS:

Please note that additional readings and exercises may be assigned and that this schedule may be modified during the semester. Modifications will be announced during class periods so it is essential that you attend classes.

Tuesday, Aug. 26, 2003. Introduction to class. Discussion about what makes good science, health and medical reporting. An overview of the history of science writing. What is science? What are news values? How do the worlds of science and journalism differ? Assignment: In class, we will read Natalie Angier's "Busy as a Bee" and John Noble Wilford's article about Saturn. Students will write brief articles, telling about themselves and their goals for the class. Materials for the first reading assignment, due Sept. 2, will be distributed.

Tuesday, Sept. 2, 2003. Meet at MSU Library. Terry Link, MSU librarian, will discuss health, medical and science resources at the MSU Library and on the Internet. We will also discuss ProfNet, the Media Resource Service and other ways of finding experts and obtaining information. We will also discuss some science periodicals and the assigned readings. Assignment: Read "History of Science writing," "Journalism and Science: The Creative Tension," and "Dr. Daedalus" in the resource guide. Read background material on the Media Resource Service, ProfNet and finding an expert in the resource guide.

Tuesday, Sept. 9, 2003. We will discuss agenda setting in science, health and medical journalism. We will also talk about the importance of accuracy, clarity and other critical elements of excellent science writing. Assignment: Read "Quantum Schmantum" in Best American Science Writing 2002, "The Mania" (handout) and "Agenda setting" articles (pages 20 to 40) in the resource guide.

Tuesday, Sept. 16, 2003. Sue Nichols, MSU science writer, will discuss science writing at a large research university. She will talk about interviewing scientists, translating science research papers into clear and understandable press releases, and writing articles for the lay audience. Assignment: Read "The Thirty Years War" and "Rethinking the Brain" in Best American Science Writing 2000 and "Communicating Science News" in the resource guide. Also, read Chapter 28 (colleges and universities) in "A Field Guide for Science Writers."

Tuesday, Sept. 23, 2003. Discussion of writing about astronomy and the space sciences. We will meet with David Batch, MSU Planetarium director, at 8 p.m. at the MSU Planetarium. Assignment: Read "Life Beyond Earth," "Hubble Error," and "Rehearsal for Blackout" in the resource guide. Also, read "Shadowy Science," in Best American Science Writing 2002 and Chapter 25 (Writing about Astronomy) in A Field Guide for Science Writers. Also, turn in a two to three-page press release and one-page public relations strategy about a proposed science, health or medical story.

Tuesday, Sept. 30, 2003. Discussion of medical writing and communicating about risk and uncertainty. Discussion about freelance writing and writing a query letter. Assignment: Read "Mrs. Kelly's Monster," "Reporters as Gatekeepers," "Certainty of Uncertainty," and "Studies Good and Bad," in the resource guide. Read Chapter 9 (Freelance writing) and Chapter 17 (Critical coverage of public health and government) in A Field Guide for Science Writers.

Tuesday, Oct. 7, 2003. Pete Carrington, MSU science illustrator, will discuss how to make science and nature interesting and clear, through science illustrations. He will lead us on a walk on campus and show examples of his work. We will also discuss writing profiles and using people in stories. Assignment: Read “Genome Warrior” and “Bones to Pick” in resource guide. Read “Penninger,” “Crimson Tide,” and “Medicine’s Race Problem” in Best American Science Writing 2002. Turn in a one-page query letter proposing a magazine article.

Tuesday, Oct. 14, 2003. Discussion of investigative science and health journalism. Assignment: Read “Monkey Wars,” “When Bugs Bite Back,” and “Biotech Death of Jesse Gelsinger” in resource guide. Read “The Certainty of Uncertainty,” “Studies, Good and Bad,” and “Questions Reporters Can Ask” in resource guide. Also, read Chapter 11 (Investigative Science Journalism) in A Field Guide for Science Writers.

Tuesday, Oct. 21, 2003. Meet at MSU Museum. We will meet with curator Val Berryman and discuss how he planned and developed the exhibit on “100 Years of Flight.” Assignment: “Read coverage of Wright Brothers’ first flight and “Making it Fly” by Peter Rinearson in resource guide. Also, read Chapter 2 (Covering Science for Newspapers) and Chapter 30 (Non-profits, small research laboratories and museums) in A Field Guide for Science Writers. Turn in a 3 to 4 page article about a science, health or medical topic for a newspaper.

Tuesday, Oct. 28, 2003. Howard Brody, director of the Center for Ethics and the Humanity at MSU, will talk about ethical issues faced by science and health journalists. Assignment: Read “Made to Order Savior,” “A Desire to Duplicate,” and “Brothers With Heart” in Best American Science Writing 2002 and Chapter 31 (business and industry) in A Field Guide for Science Writers.

Tuesday, Nov. 4, 2003. Discussion about the media’s role in health and medical campaigns. Speaker: Asst. Dean and Brandt Professor Chuck Salmon will speak on the media’s role in health campaigns. Assignment: Read “Soft Science of Dietary Fat” and “Mothers and Others” in Best American Science Writing 2002 and “Let Them Eat Fat,” in resource guide.

Tuesday, Nov. 11, 2003. Jim Tiedje, university distinguished professor, and his graduate students will discuss their research on using microbes to clean up pollution. We will discuss interviewing scientists. Assignment: Read “I Love My Glow Bunny” and “Rethinking the Brain” in Best American Science Writing 2002 and Chapter 7 (journalists and scientists as co-authors) in A Field Guide for Science Writing.

Tuesday, Nov. 18, 2003. Discussion about writing about nature and environmental science topics. Assignment: Read “The Eco-Optimist” and “George Divoky’s Planet” in Best American Science Writing 2002, “Why leaves turn color in the fall” by Diane Ackerman and “Running Dry” by Jacques Leslie in the resource guide and Chapter 22 (environmental writing) in A Field Guide for Science Writing. Turn in 6 to 10 page magazine article.

Tuesday, Nov. 25, 2003. Class presentations. Students will make presentations, lead discussions and turn in a 6 to 8 page paper on their topic on either Nov. 25 or Dec. 2.

Discussion about writing about technology and the Internet. Assignment: Read “Pirate Utopia,” “Code Red for the Web,” and “Of Altruism, Heroism,” in Best American Science Writing 2002 and Chapter 26 (Technology writing) in A Field Guide for Science Writing.

Tuesday, December 2, 2003. Class presentations continue. Discussion about careers as science, health and medical journalists. Assignment: Read “What Brings A World into Being,” and “Can Science Explain Everything? Anything?” in Best American Science Writing 2002.