

Environmental Reporting, Fall 2003 (revised version)

Thursday 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

(PLEASE NOTE: A few classes will go later than 8:00)

Room 601C

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Covering the environment requires that journalists have the ability to report on myriad complex and interwoven subjects, from politics, law and energy to natural history, waste, toxicology and epidemiology. This course will give students an introduction to finding and tackling these often highly difficult stories. The emphasis of the class is on developing a balanced and nuanced approach to reporting and writing environmental stories.

Reading:

The Reporter's Environmental Handbook by B. West, P. Sandman, M. Greenberg; Rutgers University Press. (Available through Amazon.)

The New York Environment Book by Eric Goldstein and Mark Izeman; Island Press. (Available through Amazon.)

Reporting on Risk by the Foundation for American Communications. (I have placed an order for the class; in the interim, the booklet is available at <http://www.facsnet.org>, under "Reporting Tools.")

September 18: Introduction, Finding Stories

Review syllabus. Discuss the role of journalists specializing in the environment: they are often in the role of educating the public about science and risk assessment, so it is crucial that they are aware of the pitfalls common to these disciplines. They are also often people with strong personal concerns about the issues. How to think about maintaining balance in the face of scientific unknowns and potential biases. How to find story ideas.

Assignment:

1. Clip an environmental story that has been in a newspaper or magazine in the last month or so and write a 500-word analysis of what did and did not work about the piece, particularly in light of some of the issues we talked about during class. Write about what you would have done differently (if anything)—such as other sources you might have contacted. Hand in the original piece with your analysis at the beginning of class on the 25th.
2. Start thinking about a topic for an 800-word story due on October 2nd.
3. Read handouts, including the environmental law timeline
4. Come up with questions for Peter Lehner (for recent actions check the attorney general's web site www.oag.state.ny.us and look under Environment)

September 25: Evaluating Sources, Structuring the Piece

NOTE: Class will run until 8:30 this evening

Discussion about how to find and evaluate sources who often have very strong and uncompromising views about the topics you will be reporting on. How to organize and write complicated shades-of-gray stories in less space than they deserve (and more space than they will probably get).

GUEST SPEAKER: Peter Lehner, environmental bureau chief at the New York State's Attorney General's Office and environmental law professor at Columbia

Assignment:

- 1) Read handouts
- 2) Report and write an 800-word story. Feel free to contact me at any point via phone or e-mail to discuss it. Be sure to hand in both a hard copy at the outset of class on the

2nd and to send me an electronic version. Always include your sources—both human and text.

October 2: The Perils of Epidemiology

Discuss how the first stories went, issues that came up and so on. Then: Covering public health is an integral part of environmental reporting, but epidemiological and other studies are often hard to make sense of and evaluate. How to tackle some of the kinds of studies or reports you will come across.

NOTE: Class will run until 9:00 this evening

GUEST SPEAKER: Jessica Ancker, biostatistician extraordinaire from Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health and former medical reporter for the AP

Assignment:

1. Read and evaluate your colleagues' papers, which will be sent to you via e-mail.
2. Read handouts
3. Start thinking about the next topic you would like to write about, for the 1,200-word story due on October 23rd.

October 9: Reporting on Risk

We will discuss some of the stories handed in last week. And will spend more time on interpreting studies as well as assessing and portraying risk to your audience.

Assignment:

1. Read handouts
2. Rewrite first story if required
3. Keep working on 1,200-word piece for the 23rd
4. Each student will be given a compound or class of compounds—such as PCBs, dioxins, mercury, lead, etc...—and will have to find out as much about it as they can about it and write a 500-word maximum summary to be handed in on the 24th. Remember, as always, to include sources.

October 16: Topic of Choice

We will focus on a certain subject area and talk about how to report on it and some of the kinds of sources and stories that could provide a new way into the topic.

Assignment:

1. Finish 1,200-word piece to be handed in on the 23rd
2. Read handouts
3. Start thinking of a "natural" place you would like to write your 1,000-word (or more) nature essay about

October 23: Nature Writing I

Some of the most powerful and transforming environmental writing has a very strong personal voice. We will talk about the long lyrical tradition of environmental writing and how to approach stories in a more personal way.

GUEST SPEAKER: Dan Fagin, Newsday's environment reporter and president of the Society of Environmental

Assignment:

1. Read your colleagues papers that will be sent to you via e-mail
2. Read handouts
3. Keep thinking about nature essay

NOTE: A viewing of "Lemurs," a hilarious nature documentary starring John Cleese is optional after class. Please let me know well in advance if you are interested in attending.

October 30: Nature Writing II

NOTE: Class will run until 9:00 this evening

Continuation of discussion of nature and environmental essay writing.

GUEST SPEAKER: Bruce Stutz, former editor of *Natural History*, freelance writer and author of *Natural Lives, Modern Times: People and Places of the Delaware River*

Assignment:

1. Read handouts
2. Write a 1,000-word descriptive—and informative—nature essay. The piece can be based on a day that you spend in a semi-wild place (say, Bear Mountain or Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge) or it can be a musing about an urban site. The point is to become immersed in a place and to communicate about it or its importance in a lyrical way. The essay must be handed in at the beginning of class on the 6th. Remember that your piece needs facts! It can't just be something about how pretty the sunset was.

November 6: International Environmental Reporting

Most environmental stories are international in scope, although they are not often covered this way. Review of some of the important international treaties to be aware of, and some of the pleasures and pitfalls of reporting internationally.

POSSIBLE GUEST SPEAKER: James Fahn, author of *A Land on Fire* (about his environmental reporting experiences in Thailand) and former SIPA student.

Assignment:

1. Read handouts
2. Read your colleagues' nature essays, which will be e-mailed to you

November 13: Conclusion

We will go over some of the nature pieces that were handed in on the 6th. And then we will talk about how to push your environmental reporting to a different level once you have mastered the basics—for example, how to file a FOIA request.

And here follows a far-from-complete list of environmental and related books:

any of the Best American Science and Nature Writing series (put out annually by Houghton Mifflin)

The Monkey Wrench Gang and anything else by Edward Abbey

The Hudson River by Robert Boyle

Silent Spring or anything else by Rachel Carson

Critical Condition: Human Health and the Environment by Eric Chivian et al.

News and Numbers by Victor Cohn (Iowa State University Press)

Losing Ground by Mark Dowie

The Immense Journey or anything by Loren Eiseley

A Land on Fire by James Fahn

Green Ink by Michael Frome

A Civil Action by Jonathan Harr

Savages by Joe Kane

A Natural History of New York City by John Kieran

Environmental Hazards by Sheldon Krimsky and Alonzo Plough

Cod by Mark Kurlansky

Media and the Environment edited by Craig LaMay et al.

Sand County Almanac by Aldo Leopold

anything by Peter Mathiessen

The End of Nature by Bill McKibben

The Control of Nature or anything else by John McPhee

The Bottom of the Harbor by Joseph Mitchell

Wild New York by Margaret Mittelbach and Michale Crewdson

Classics in Environmental Studies edited by N. Nelissen, J. Van Der Straaten, L. Klinkers

In Trouble Again or anything by Redmond O'Hanlon

Natural Acts or anything else by David Quammen

Calculated Risks by Joseph V. Rodricks

Risk by David Ropeik and George Gray

The Green Revolution by Kirkpatrick Sale

Greening International Environmental Law edited by Philippe Sands

A Fierce Green Fire: The American Environmental Movement by Philip Shabecoff

Toxic Sludge is Good for You! by John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton (authors of Trust Us, We're Experts)

anything by Edward O. Wilson

Red Tails in Love by Marie Winn

State of the World by the WorldWatch Institute