Writing About Science and Medicine
Journalism & Electronic Media 450 / Information Sciences 450
Spring 2023
MWF 10:20-11:10

Instructor: Julie Andsager  
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Office hours: Tuesday 1-3, Wednesday 1:30-2:30, or by appointment  
office: 333 COM

Catalog course description
Writing workshop to analyze examples of successful science writing and write a series of articles for the general public based on scientific journals, news conferences, technical meetings, and interviews.

Course objectives
> To be able to identify science- and medicine-related topics, appropriate audiences, and accurately convey information in meaningful ways.
> To be able to read and understand studies published in scientific, peer-reviewed journals.
> To be able to interpret science-related statistics and explain them to audiences.
> To be able to write about popular science in various styles, including print and audio news, social media, and blogging.
> To communicate with scientists, healthcare professionals, and the public ethically and sensitively.

Required materials
> Readings will be posted on the class Canvas site. No textbook required. The posted readings are required and should be read prior to the class meeting for the week (or specific date, if announced).

Course business issues

Plagiarism and academic dishonesty
Plagiarism occurs when students present work that is not their own. The University of Tennessee defines plagiarism as “using the intellectual property or product of someone else without giving proper credit. The undocumented use of someone else’s words or ideas in any medium of communication (unless such information is recognized as common knowledge)” (Hilltopics, 2013-2014, p. 16). Plagiarism may result in failure of this course and/or dismissal from UT.

Academic dishonesty is a serious matter. It includes falsifying or misrepresenting data – such as interviews or research sources – as well as submitting the same writing or assignment in more than one course. (See more detail in Hilltopics, p. 17). Academic dishonesty may result in failing an assignment or the course.

Diversity statement from the College
The College of Communication & Information recognizes and values diversity. Exposing students to diverse people, ideas, and cultures increases opportunities for intellectual inquiry, encourages critical thinking, and enhances communication and information competence. When all viewpoints are heard, thoughtfully considered, and respectfully responded to, everyone benefits. Diversity and fairness unite us with the wider professional and global community.
**Discourse statement from UTK**

A true university education is one in which students hear, study, and discuss ideas that challenge their thinking and encourage them to consider points of view different from their own. Students should expect to hear ideas that make them uncomfortable, should be able to explain and master concepts they disagree with, and should feel free to take opposing views as part of civil academic discourse. We remind all members of the campus community that the Campus Free Speech Protection Act—signed into state law in 2017—applies to everyone. The act endorses the fundamental responsibility of the university by defining what we are not to do: “It is not the proper role of an institution to attempt to shield individuals from free speech, including ideas and opinions they find offensive, unwise, immoral, indecent, disagreeable, conservative, liberal, traditional, radical, or wrongheaded.” These principles are recognized in the Board of Trustees Policy Affirming Principles of Free Speech for Students and Faculty (BT0021).

**Disability services**

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, is committed to providing an inclusive learning environment for all students. If you anticipate or experience a barrier in this course due to a chronic health condition, a learning, hearing, neurological, mental health, vision, physical, or other kind of disability, or a temporary injury, you are encouraged to contact Student Disability Services (SDS) at 865-974-6087 or sds@utk.edu. An SDS Coordinator will meet with you to develop a plan to ensure you have equitable access to this course. If you are already registered with SDS, please contact your instructor to discuss implementing accommodations included in your course access letter.

**Absences**

You are expected to attend every class meeting unless you are ill. If you are sick, please contact me via email before or during the class meeting, especially if you think you’ve been exposed to COVID. If you must miss class for a University-sponsored activity, you must provide a memo from the person in charge (e.g., the Student Athletic Services, debate coach, etc.) explaining your absence. If you must attend a funeral, you must bring a folder from the service to show me afterward. Unexcused absences reduce your grade for Participation.

*Pop quizzes* – If it becomes apparent that the class isn’t reading the weekly assignments, I will use pop quizzes to encourage you to do so. Those will be used as part of the Participation grade.

**Deadlines and late penalties**

Science writers must strictly adhere to deadlines, and so must you. Any assignment that is not submitted to Canvas by its deadline will begin to lose points immediately. Unless otherwise stated on the assignment instructions, the deadline will be 5 p.m. on the day the assignment is due. Five percent will be deducted from the assignment’s grade if the assignment is turned in the same day before midnight, 10% would be deducted.

**Assignments**

Choose a topic that you’ll return to throughout the semester; you’ll become an expert on it. It may be the reason you’re taking this class. You will be developing the topic from various angles – new studies; affected populations; business/policy issues. Over the course of the semester, you’ll be tracking your topic through others’ blogs, news stories, new studies, tweets, etc. You will be writing your own material. Correct spelling, grammar, punctuation, and accuracy are required in everything you produce. Grades for the assignments will be based partly on these. (See individual assignment descriptions for more detail.)

More detail will be provided with each assignment as it is made:
**New study story** – Write a news story about a newly published article reporting a new study in a peer-reviewed scientific or medical journal. Target audience: general public. Workshopping comprises part of this grade. (about 300 words)

**Feature story** – Write a 650-word feature story on an interesting aspect of your topic (if you can’t find a local source to interview regarding your topic, talk to me about other possibilities). Must include original sources (scientists, doctors, policy people, etc.) whom you interview. This should be a focused piece that would be useful for a publication such as Popular Science, Buzzfeed, or the Health section of a large newspaper / online science-related site. Workshopping comprises part of this grade.

**Reading responses** – Two parts: Respond to prompts (often questions or lists) regarding the weekly readings. These responses will be short – as in a paragraph or so – and due before class on Mondays (9:30 a.m.). The best responses are those that synthesize the week’s readings. Turn in a total of 8 responses (though there will be about 14 weeks of reading). Part 2: We’ll be discussing recent science/health stories to see the topics and to critique the writing. Your comments will be due the day prior to the story’s discussion. Turn in a total of 6 of these (there should be 20 stories).

**Other writing** – This includes a draft set of questions for your feature story interview(s), short reports on class visitors’ presentations, and other miscellany.

**Final project** – Develop an original science/medical project that’s comprehensive and ready for a general audience. This may take the form of a long feature (800+ words); a website; a visual story with original photos; an audio story or podcast with original interviews; original art; etc. If one of the latter, some writing needs to be included (at least 200 words beyond name and project title). Workshopping comprises part of this grade.

**Graduate student credit**
Graduate students must complete an extra, substantive project to earn graduate credit. You may choose either an extra feature story (800 to 1,000 words) on a different topic or a much different approach to your topic, OR you can produce a podcast (8 minutes), OR you may write a weekly blog post for 5 weeks (160 to 200 words per post, for a total of 800 to 1,000 words). **Important:** You must make this decision and let me know your selection by the end of October.

**Participation & discussion leading** – Includes attendance, participation in discussions, interacting with guest speakers, and performance on pop quizzes (if necessary). Each student will lead in discussion of one of the science/medical stories assigned throughout the semester.

**Grading**

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**Grades:** 95% or more = A; 90-94% = A-; 86-89% = B+; 83-85% = B; 80-82% = B-; 75-79% = C+; 70-74% = C; 60-69% = D; 59% or below = F.

Grades will be based on the quality of the product you turn in for each assignment, including reading responses. When assignments are made, I will post grading rubrics to help guide you. Plagiarism or other academic fraud (as defined above) will result in a zero for the assignment. Late assignments will be treated as described above under *Deadlines and late penalties.*

**Tentative schedule** – Assignment deadlines and topics may vary due to guest speakers. (Be sure that you read each assignment before class, though.)

- **January 23-27**
  - Introduction; science/health literacy

- **January 30-February 3**
  - science writing and news writing

- **February 6-10**
  - science writers; reading / interpreting scientific articles

- **February 13-17**
  - choosing topics / organizing stories / background research

- **February 20-24**
  - sources and interviewing / background research

  **February 24**
  - due by 5 p.m.: new study story

- **February 27-March 3**
  - interviewing and profile writing; feature writing

- **March 6-10**
  - writing narratives

- **March 13-17**
  - no class – spring break

- **March 20-24**
  - first-person and opinion writing

- **March 27-31**
  - using Twitter, etc., for research and promotion

  **March 31**
  - due by 5 p.m.: feature story

- **April 3-5**
  - writing for the ear / podcasting (no class on Friday)

- **April 10-14**
  - creativity and science/medicine

- **April 17-21**
  - science and medicine in entertainment media

- **April 24-28**
  - pitching your work
May 1-5 careers, catching up

May 8 workshopping final project

Final project due: Friday, May 12, 6 p.m. All materials must be completed and submitted by this time. Anything I have not received by 6 p.m. will receive a score of zero. Late policies apply.

UTK COVID-19 GUIDELINES

CDC guidance recognizes the changing dynamics of living in a world with COVID-19. It rates COVID-19 community levels as low, medium, and high, with recommendations at each level about the use of masks and other precautions. At all levels of community spread, staying up-to-date with vaccination is the best way to protect yourself from serious illness and to limit the spread of COVID-19. Wearing a mask is always an option for any individual who chooses to do so, and the CDC recommends that those with high risk of severe illness talk with their health care providers. If you are sick, please stay in, avoid being around others as much as possible, and contact your health care provider for any symptoms that are worsening, moderate to severe, or concerning to you. For more information about vaccination or to self-report an illness and receive support, visit https://studenthealth.utk.edu/CommunityHealth. For more information about COVID-19, visit https://studenthealth.utk.edu/covid-19.