

MEJO 565 Environmental Storytelling -- Spring 2020

T-Th 5-6:15 p.m.. | Carroll 141

Instructor: Kate Sheppard

kateshep@email.unc.edu / kateshepUNC@gmail.com | Office #221

Office hours: Tuesday & Thursday 11 a.m.-1 p.m., or by appointment

Course objectives

This course focuses on investigative and feature reporting on the environment. You will gain a better understanding of writing about complex and challenging science and environmental topics for a broad audience. While we will discuss a range of topics in environmental journalism, our reporting will focus on water contamination concerns in North Carolina, including coal ash, per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), and agricultural waste. We will be reporting on this growing problem, affected communities, responsible parties, and the policymakers and scientists working to draw attention to it.

This course is designed both for journalism students who want to cover the environment and students in science and environmental fields who want to learn how to better communicate about their work. Over the course of the semester, you will work both alone and in teams as you build a portfolio of stories suitable for publication in a news outlet.

This semester, you will:

- deepen your understanding of environmental issues
- think critically about what makes something an environmental story, and what makes an environmental story interesting to readers
- gain an understanding of common challenges in communicating about scientific and environmental subjects
- develop and pitch ideas for feature and investigative stories
- identify and evaluate potential sources
- gather documents and data, build a narrative, and engage multiple methods of storytelling.
- improve your interviewing skills
- learn to think about telling stories across multiple platforms
- learn how to structure your stories for maximum impact and audience engagement
- improve your stories through both peer- and instructor revisions
- produce a multimedia, publication-quality investigative or feature story

Assigned materials for this course

The Science Writers' Investigative Reporting Handbook: A Beginner's Guide to Investigations, by Liza Gross

Exposure: Poisoned Water, Corporate Greed, and One Lawyer's Twenty-Year Battle against DuPont, by Robert Bilott

Amity and Prosperity: One Family and the Fracturing of America, by Eliza Griswold

Additional reading, viewing, and listening assignments to be distributed

Class prep

You are expected to complete all reading, viewing, or listening assignments listed under the dates below before you come to class that day. I will be adding readings to the syllabus as the semester continues, so please listen in class and check the updated web version of this syllabus for additions. Additional material will be added at least a week in advance of class. I don't assign a large volume of material each week because I want you to be able to digest it and arrive ready to talk about it. Arriving to class consistently unprepared will hurt your final grade.

Attendance

You should approach this class as you would a job. Only a death in your immediate family or an illness that requires seeing a doctor will be accepted as an excused absence. Two unexcused absences are permitted. For each unexcused absence after the first two, you will lose points from your final grade. Being late is the same thing as being absent.

Assignments

All assignments should be turned in via Google Docs at the date/time specified. Please share them with both my Gmail and my UNC email (at the top of this page). Please make sure you have set the permissions so I can edit!

Deadlines in the class are hard and fast. If you think you are going to miss a deadline, please see me at least 24 hours in advance of the deadline so we can discuss how to address it.

Communication

I will create a Google Group for this class, which will be the primary means of communication for this course. Please make sure to check the email account you give me for this class! All of the class documents and resources will also be stored in a Google Drive folder for this class. I check email quite often, so that is the best way to reach me. I am usually very prompt in responding to email, but please give me at least 8 hours to respond to inquiries. Over holidays and weekends, I may be slower to respond. Please plan your work accordingly so that I can provide you with assistance.

Seeking Help

If you need help, it's your responsibility to let me know. That is true for problems with the course material, group work, or deadlines as well as for extenuating life circumstances that affect your work. The time to seek help is as soon as you are aware of the problem.

Final grades

- 40% -- Pitches and articles in first half of semester
- 20% -- Short feature
- 30% -- Final project (*Due Tuesday, May 5, 4 p.m.*)
- 10% -- Attendance, instructor and team evaluation

Grade scale

- A (90 and above) - Could be published with little to no major editing
- B (80-89) - Could be published with moderate editing
- C (70-79) - Requires significant editing to be publishable
- D (60-69) - Not publishable -- poorly conceived, written, or sourced
- F (below 60): Did not complete, or completed with major factual or ethical problem

Graduate students -- Graduate students in this course will complete the assignments listed below, but will be expected to take leadership on a group project and/or complete an ambitious additional project, per consultation with instructor.

Week-by-Week Schedule

(additional readings to be added)

Date	Topic	Readings	Deliverables
Jan. 9	Introduction to course	Syllabus	
Jan. 14	Section 1: What do we mean by "environmental" stories?	<i>The Lorax</i> , by Dr. Seuss; The Lorax: Dr.	

		Seuss Revisited and Revised	
Jan. 16	Environmental justice	Dr. King Said Segregation Harms Us All. He Was Right.; What the Environmental Justice Movement Owes MLK	
Jan. 21	Environmental health		
Jan. 23	How to write about science	Seven tips in science journalism for finding good story ideas;The Really Big One	In class: Scientific papers distributed
Jan. 28	Rotating rewrites	David Haskill Speaks For The Trees	Draft scientific paper assignment due
Jan. 30	Interviewing	Tips for conducting interviews with scientists; Interview questions that work for newbie science reporters; Chasing the Methane Dragon	
Feb. 4	Investigative techniques	Gross pgs. 1-62	Final version of scientific paper assignment due
Feb. 6	FOIA and data collection	Gross pgs. 63-110	
Feb. 11	Section 2: Developing topics, characters and scenes	Griswold Part 1	Interview with scientist due
Feb. 13	Scenes and characters	Griswold Part 2	Edited scientist Q&A due

Feb. 17	Building a beat, pitches	Griswold Part 3	Scene piece due
Feb. 20	Headlines and ledes	Four Editors Give Tips on Writing Headlines. You Won't Believe What Happens Next; Good Beginnings: How to Write a Lede Your Editor—and Your Readers—Will Love	
Feb. 25	Nutgrafs	Nailing the Nutgraf	Explainer due
Feb. 27	Section 3: Storytelling	What Makes A Good Pitch?; Successful story pitches for This American Life	
March 3	In class: Pitch discussion and feedback	Billot Part 1	Story pitches due
March 5	<i>No class!</i>		
<i>Break</i>	---	---	---
March 17	Discussion of reporting process, problems, questions	Billot Part 2	Draft of short feature due
March 19	Reporting on complexity	Billot Part 3	
March 24	Handling complexity in your reporting	“Buried Secrets: Is Natural Gas Drilling Endangering U.S. Water Supplies?; Pros and Cons of Fracking; Listen: Game Changer	Short feature due
March 26	Ethical issues in environment and science reporting	Where do science journalists draw the line?; When Is Science Reporting Ethical?	
March 31	Section 4: Putting it all together		
April 2	Final project pitch discussion		Pitches due for final project due

April 7	Different sides, one story	Perfect Nails, Poisoned Workers, What the 'Times' Got Wrong About Nail Salons; The everyday effects of The New York Times' nail salon exposé	
April 9	Multimedia storytelling	Seeing Is Believing: Using Multimedia To Tell The Climate Change Story; Offshore	Story memo due; Bring one example of a multimedia environmental story element you think is well-done
April 14	In class: Peer editing		First draft due
April 16	In class: Trouble-shooting and editing		
April 21	Environmental storytelling in music, art, social media		Bring an example of unconventional environmental storytelling
April 23	Next steps, freelancing, building your portfolio, internships		Final projects due
Final	Tuesday, May 5, 4 p.m.		Presentations of multimedia

Exercise and assignment descriptions

Scientific paper assignment

For this assignment, you will learn how to develop a short news story on a paper published in a peer-reviewed science or legal journal. This will allow you to practice

reading, evaluating, and translating academic work for your audience. I will distribute source articles in class, and you will turn in a 400-600 word draft news story. Both peers and the instructor will give in-class feedback on the drafts to be incorporated into a revised version for grading.

Practice interview assignment

You will identify a scientist or legal expert who has recently published work on an environmental topic and set up an interview with them of approximately 30 minutes. You will turn in a transcript of the interview.

Scene assignment

You will submit a scene sketch for an environmental story of approximately 500 words. This will include descriptions of a location, activity, surroundings, characters, or events. The purpose of this activity is to get you thinking about how to capture and make real what can be complex or obscure topics.

First story pitch

You will submit a list of no less than three potential story ideas for your first story. Your first story for this class will be an 800-word article on an environmental topic in North Carolina. Your pitches should include evidence that you have researched the topic, gathered supporting scientific materials, conducted at least one preliminary interview, and surveyed other coverage of the topic. We will discuss the pitches in class and I will provide feedback on how to proceed in reporting.

First story assignment

You will develop one of your story pitches into an 800-word article suitable for publication. The piece should cite scientific, legal or legislative materials; include at least three interviews, and demonstrate understanding of the nuances and complexity of the subject matter.

Project pitch assignment

You will submit a list of no less than three potential story ideas for your final project story. The final project is a 1,500-word article (3,000-word for graduate students) and supporting multimedia materials on an environmental topic relevant to North Carolina or the Southern United States. Your pitches should include evidence that you have researched the topic, gathered supporting scientific materials, conducted at least one preliminary interview, and surveyed other coverage of the topic. I will provide feedback on your pitches to determine how to proceed in reporting.

Story memo assignment

You will submit a memo of ~400 words on the elements you need for your final project. This can include a list of specific interviews, types of research, scenes, graphics, charts, or other materials crucial to successfully completing your final project. This can also include an outline, an evaluation of multimedia tools, a description of how you envision the product, or questions you are grappling with as you pull together the pieces.

First draft of project

You will submit a draft of at least 1,000 words showing progress toward your final project. We will be providing feedback in class and working together to address any reporting challenges or concerns.

Final project

You will submit a 1,500-word article story and at least one supporting multimedia element – photo, video, audio, map, or infographic – to help audiences better understand your story. *Due: Tuesday, May 5, 4 p.m.*

Honor Code

I expect students to conduct themselves within the guidelines of the University honor system (<http://honor.unc.edu>). All academic work should be done with the high levels of honesty and integrity that this University demands. You are expected to produce your own work in this class. If you have any questions about your responsibility or your instructor's responsibility as a faculty member under the Honor Code, please see the course instructor or Senior Associate Dean Charlie Tuggle, or you may speak with a representative of the Student Attorney Office or the Office of the Dean of Students.

Diversity

The University's policy on Prohibiting Harassment and Discrimination is outlined in the 20152016 Undergraduate Bulletin <http://www.unc.edu/ugradbulletin/>. UNC is committed to providing an inclusive and welcoming environment for all members of our community and does not discriminate in offering access to its educational programs and activities on the basis of age, gender, race, color, national origin, religion, creed, disability, veteran's status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

Special Accommodations

If you require special accommodations to attend or participate in this course, please let the instructor know as soon as possible. If you need information about disabilities visit the Accessibility Services website at <https://accessibility.unc.edu/>

ACEJMC Core Values and Competencies

The Hussman School of Journalism and Media's accrediting body outlines a number of values you should be aware of and competencies you should be able to demonstrate by the time you graduate from our program. [Learn more about them here.](#)

No single course could possibly give you all of these values and competencies; but collectively, our classes are designed to build your abilities in each of these areas. In this class, we will address a number of the values and competencies. Specifically, this course is designed to help you:

- Think critically, creatively and independently
- Conduct research and evaluate information by methods appropriate to the communications professions in which they work
- Apply basic numerical and statistical concepts
- Apply tools and technologies appropriate for the communications professions in which they work