

MEJO 565 Environmental Storytelling -- Spring 2021

T-Th 5-6:15 p.m..

Instructor: Kate Sheppard

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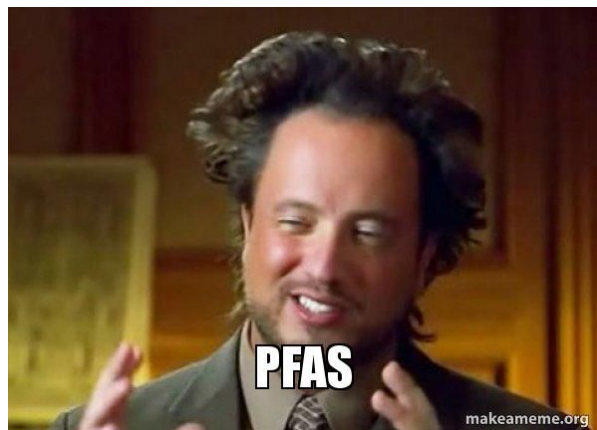
Office hours: Fridays 12 p.m.-2 p.m., or by appointment

Zoom: <https://unc.zoom.us/j/99739746836?pwd=MGN6ejhGYVF6djRMbTJycTNGS0drQT09>

PW: enviroj

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, specifically per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS). 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
- *Poisoned City*, by Anna Clark
- 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. I allow two unexcused absences, but anything beyond that will negatively impact your final grade. We are doing a lot of work collaboratively this semester, and you will be letting others down if you aren't present, on time, and engaged.

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 talk to me at least 24 hours in advance so we can discuss how to address it.

Communication

We don't really know what spring 2021 has in store for us, so we will all need to be flexible, compassionate and communicative. If you are having a hard time with something, tell me! If you need something from your classmates, talk to them! The time to ask for help is before you are in crisis mode or have missed a deadline. I am pathologically responsive on email and easy to meet for a phone or Zoom call. Just speak up!

I will create a Google Group for this class, which will be the primary means of sending any class updates or information. 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.

Final grades

40% -- Pitches and articles in first half of semester

20% -- Short feature

30% -- Final project

10% -- Attendance, instructor and collaborator evaluations

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 punishable
- 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.

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 and Anti-Racism

The University's "Policy on Prohibited Discrimination, Harassment and Related Misconduct" is available online here. UNC is committed to providing an inclusive and welcoming environment for all members of our community and does not discriminate in 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.

Additionally, given recent national and local events, I feel it is important to set out my expectations for class conduct and discussion -- both my own and yours. I do so in accordance with the main purposes of both academia and journalism: to distinguish between valid and invalid knowledge and judgments, and to broaden our perspective on the world and the experiences of others.

In my class, I expect students to:

- Refrain from judging individuals according to the collective groups they may belong to (e.g. race, gender, class, sexual orientation, disability status, etc.);
- Assess ideas and arguments according to the evidence and not based on the identities of the individual who created them;
- Acknowledge and seek to better understand the historical and contemporary systems of racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism that have created real disparities in people's lives, how they see the world, and the opportunities that are available to them;
- And consider the often invisible systems of power at play in a given situation and the perspective of those who do not have that power.

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 accrediting body for the Hussman School of Journalism and Media 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:

- Understand and apply the principles of freedom of speech and press, including the right to monitor and criticize power.
- Demonstrate an understanding of professional ethical principles and work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity.
- Think critically, creatively and independently.
- Write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the professions, audiences and purposes we serve.
- Critically evaluate your own work and that of others for accuracy and fairness, clarity, appropriate style and grammatical correctness.

Week-by-Week Schedule

(additional readings to be added)

| Date | Topic | Readings | Deliverables |
|---------|--|--|---------------------------------|
| Jan. 19 | Introduction to course | Syllabus | |
| Jan. 21 | Section 1: What do we mean by “environmental” stories? | <i>The Lorax</i> , by Dr. Seuss; The Lorax: Dr. Seuss Revisited and Revised | |
| Jan. 26 | Environmental justice | Dr. King Said Segregation Harms Us All. He Was Right.; What the Environmental Justice Movement Owes MLK | |
| Jan. 28 | Environmental health | Welcome to Beautiful Parkersburg. West | Take a stab at the questions on |

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| | | Virginia ; Dupont and the Chemistry of Deception ; PFAS Chemicals And You | the slide for the papers |
| Feb. 2 | Science writing | PFAS/PFOS paper, Seven tips in science journalism for finding good story ideas ; The Really Big One | In class: Scientific paper assignment distributed |
| Feb. 4 | Section 2: Techniques Interviewing | David Haskill Speaks For The Trees | Pick a scientist to interview and make contact |
| Feb. 9 | Rotating rewrites | Tips for conducting interviews with scientists ; Interview questions that work for newbie science reporters ; Chasing the Methane Dragon | Draft scientific paper assignment due |
| Feb. 11 | Investigative work | Gross pgs. 1-62; A Compassionate Substance | |
| Feb. 18 | FOIA and data collection | Gross pgs. 63-110; A Behind the Scenes Look At Scott Pruitt's Dysfunctional EPA | Final version of scientific paper assignment due |
| Feb. 23 | Headlines, ledes, nutgrafs | 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 ; Nailing the Nutgraf | Scientist Q&A due |

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| Feb. 25 | Explainers | PFAS explainer ; PFAS lawsuit podcast | |
| March 2 | Section 3: Storytelling Characters | Poisoned City, Part 1 | |
| March 4 | Scenes | | In-class scene exercise |
| March 9 | Writing at length | Poisoned City, Part 2 | Explainer due |
| March 16 | Guest speaker: Anna Clark | Poisoned City, Part 3 | |
| March 18 | Pitches | | Story pitches due |
| March 23 | Discussion of reporting process, problems, questions | | |
| March 25 | Peer editing | | Draft of short feature due |
| March 30 | Introducing partner for final project | Billot selection | |
| April 1 | Legal issues in reporting | Billot selection | Short feature due |
| April 6 | Handling complexity in your reporting | "Buried Secrets: Is Natural Gas Drilling Endangering U.S. Water Supplies?"; Pros and Cons of Fracking ; Listen: Game Changer | |
| April 8 | Final project pitch discussion | Where do science journalists draw the line? ; When Is Science Reporting Ethical? | Pitches due for final project due |
| April 13 | Section 4: Putting it all together | (to be added) | |
| April 15 | Ethical issues in environment and science reporting | (to be added) | |

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| April 20 | 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 | Story memo due |
| April 22 | Multimedia storytelling | Seeing Is Believing: Using Multimedia To Tell The Climate Change Story; Offshore | Bring one example of a multimedia environmental story element you think is well-done |
| April 27 | In class: Trouble-shooting and editing | | First draft due |
| April 29 | Environmental storytelling in music, art, social media | | Bring an example of unconventional environmental storytelling |
| May 4 | Next steps, freelancing, building your portfolio, internships | | |
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| Final - May TK | Project presentations | | Final projects due |
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- 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