BIOMEDICAL REPORTING
Spring 2012
Mondays 9:00–11:45 a.m.
Room 12 VTH

This course is designed mainly to help you become more adept at writing for the public about biomedical topics. It also is intended to acquaint you further with biomedical writing for other audiences and to aid you in working with the media. Other goals include strengthening your information-gathering and general writing skills, promoting critical thinking, and increasing your knowledge of medicine, biomedical research, and biomedical institutions.

These goals will be pursued through classroom activities, readings, and (of course) writing assignments. Because much of your and others’ learning will depend on your participation, you are expected to attend class regularly. Only in exceptional circumstances should anyone miss more than two sessions of the course.


Core readings are noted on the schedule below, and additional readings (for instance, examples of biomedical reporting) will be announced in class. You are also asked to follow current biomedical reporting in various media and share pertinent items with classmates.

Students are encouraged to meet with the instructor at least twice during the course for conferences on their writing. Typically, one conference should be before the middle of the course and the other after. Additional conferences are readily available on request.

The graded items for this course, the dates they are due, and the percentages of your basic grade that they will constitute, are the following:

- analysis of a medical news story 1/30 5%
- information-searching assignment 2/6 5%
- story based on journal article 2/13 10%
- story based on presentation 2/27 5%
- story based on interview 3/5 10%
- exercise on health-writing technique 3/26 5%
- analysis of a biomedical feature article 4/2 5%
- critique of classmate’s draft of overview feature 4/16 5%
- overview feature 4/23 15%
- final project 4/30* 25%
- class participation 10%

*If desired, final assignment can be revised after the 4/30 session and submitted by 5/7.

All writing assignments are to be word-processed and double-spaced, and pages should be numbered. For readability, please leave the right margin ragged; do not justify it. Normally,
assignments should be submitted on time. However, you may submit one assignment (other than the final paper) one session late without penalty.

Grading will be as follows:

- **A** 90-100 (highly professional or otherwise outstanding)
- **B** 80-89 (very good; approaching professional quality)
- **C** 70-79 (adequate)
- **D** 60-69 (marginal)
- **F** <60 (unacceptable)

For all assignments, both content and style will be considered.

You are encouraged to target for publication your writing for this course. Five points will be added to the grade of each assignment published, or accepted for publication, by April 30.

The success of a course such as this one depends on contributions from the students as well as from the instructor. Suggestions for making the course more educational and enjoyable are appreciated at any time.

**TENTATIVE SCHEDULE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session/Date</th>
<th>Main Activities and Assignments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unit I: Introduction to Biomedical Reporting</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Jan 23</td>
<td>Introduction: The Participants and the Course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discussion: The Scope of Biomedical Reporting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction: Health-Writing Technique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unit II: Sources of Story Ideas and Information</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Jan 30</td>
<td>Introduction: Sources of Story Ideas and Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discussion: Exercises and Writing Assignment Due Today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discussion: Books and Periodicals as Sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Workshop: Some Major Medical Journals; News Sections of Journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Presentation: Resources of the Medical Sciences Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Visit to Medical Sciences Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Core Reading Due:</strong></td>
<td>text: Chapter 1 (“Some Basics”), Chapter 2 (“Books and Periodicals”), Chapter 7 (“Health-Writing Technique”), pp. 123-top of 126 (“News Stories and News Releases”), examples on pp. 127-135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exercises Due:</strong></td>
<td>Do the exercises on pages 7 and 8 of the textbook. You need not hand in your answers, but you should be ready to discuss them in class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Writing Due:</strong></td>
<td>analysis of a medical news story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Read the medical news story distributed in class for this assignment, and consider it in the context of material presented in class last week and the reading for today. Using the examples on pages 127-135 of the textbook as models, write comments about the content and crafting of the story in the column provided for this purpose. On a separate page, supply a brief</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(approximately 100- to 200-word) evaluation of the story. Be ready to discuss the story in class.

3
Feb 6
Discussion: Government, Associations, and Other Institutions as Sources
In Class: Exercise: Identifying Potentially Newsworthy Medical Sessions at a Conference

Core Reading Due:
- text: Chapter 3 (“Government, Associations, and Other Institutions”)
- Woloshin, Steven, and Schwartz, Lisa M. Media reporting on research presented at scientific meetings: more caution needed. MJA 2006;184:576-580.

Exercises Due:
Do exercises 1 and 2 on pages 49 and 50. You need not hand in your answers, but you should be ready to discuss them in class.

Writing Due: information-searching assignment
Instructions for this assignment will be e-mailed to you.

4
Feb 13
Discussion: Researchers, Clinicians, Patients, and Other People as Sources—
Mock Interview(s)
Introduction to Writing Assignment: Story Based on Interview
Discussion: Online Resources
Discussion: Exercises Due Today
Workshop: Writing Assignment for Today

Core Reading Due:
- text: Chapter 4 (“Researchers, Clinicians, Patients, and Others”) and Chapter 5 (“Online Resources”)

Exercises Due:
Do exercise 1a on page 63, exercise 3 on page 64, and exercises 1-3 on page 71. You need not hand in your answers, but you should be ready to discuss them in class.

Writing Due: news story based on a journal article
Find in a medical journal or basic medical science journal a newsworthy report of original research, and write a news story about it. The story should run about 500 words. At the beginning of the story, specify the newspaper or other site for which the story is intended. Attach a copy of the journal article.

5
Feb 20
To Be Rescheduled
(This session will be replaced by a supper seminar or lunch seminar, guest session, field trip, or other special session later in the semester.)
Unit III: Evaluating Biomedical Information

6 Feb 27
Discussion: Evaluating Medical Information—Some Basics
Discussion: Exercises Due Today
Workshop: Writing Assignment for Today
Introduction: The Major Writing Assignments for the Course
Progress Reports: Writing Assignment Due Next Week

Core Reading Due:
- text: Chapter 6 (“Evaluating Information”)

Exercises Due:
Do exercises 1 and 4 on pages 96-97. You need not hand in your answers, but you should be ready to discuss them in class.

Writing Due: news story based on presentation
Attend a presentation on a biomedical topic, or watch one on the Internet. Then write a news story about it. The story should run about 500 words. At the beginning of the story, specify the venue for which the story is intended. If you draw on sources other than the presentation, please list them at the end of the story.

7 Mar 5
Discussion: Reading for Today
Discussion: Exercises Due Today
Workshop: Writing Assignment for Today
Workshop: Some Lighter Biomedical Reading

Core Reading Due:
- text: Chapter 14 (“Presenting Risk”)

Exercises Due:
Do the exercises on page 288. You need not hand in your answers, but you should be ready to discuss them in class.

Writing Due: story based on interview
Interview a biomedical scientist, health professional, biomedical reporter, or other person involved in medical research, medical care, medical education, medical communication, or another aspect of biomedicine. The interview may focus on the person's work, a biomedical issue, or another topic of biomedical interest. Prepare an article presenting highlights of the interview; the article should run about 500 to 1000 words. At the beginning of the story, indicate the site for which the story is intended. At the end, list all sources used.

Spring Break * Spring Break * Spring Break * Spring Break * Spring Break * Spring Break

8 Mar 19
Discussion: Reading Due Today
Introduction: Health-Writing Style and Genres
Discussion: Plans for Overview Feature

Core Reading Due:
• Fagerlin, Angela, Zikmund-Fisher, Brian J., and Ubel, Peter A. Helping patients decide: ten steps to better risk communication. JNCI: Journal of the National Cancer Institute 2011;103(19):1436-1443.
• One or more stories dealing with statistics and risk

Unit IV: Health-Writing Style and Genres

9
March 26
Discussion: Exercises Due Today
Discussion: Health-Writing Style
Discussion: Some Health-Related Feature Articles
Core Reading Due:
• text: Chapter 7 (review it), pp. 138-143 (“The Feature Article Family”), and Chapter 10 (“Sensitivity and Style”)
• some examples of feature articles
Exercises Due:
Do exercise 2 on page 145 for articles 8-1 and 8-2, and do exercises 1 and 2 on pages 200-201. You need not hand in your answers, but you should be ready to discuss them in class.
Writing Due: exercise on health-writing technique
Do either exercise 1 on page 115 or exercise 3 on page 116. This exercise will be graded.

10
April 2
Discussion: Investigative Reporting on Medicine and Health
Discussion: Biomedical Essays, Columns, and Book Reviews
Progress Reports: Overview Features
Core Reading Due:
• selected articles from the Summer 2003 and Spring 2009 issues of Nieman Reports
• some investigative stories on medical topics
• some biomedical essays, columns, and book reviews
Exercises Due:
Do exercise 2 on page 145 for articles 8-3 and 8-4.
Writing Due: analysis of a biomedical feature article
Identify a biomedical feature article that you consider of generally high quality. The article may be in any medium. In up to 500 words, identify the main strengths of the story; include examples to illustrate your points. If appropriate, also identify limitations of the article. Accompany your analysis with a copy of the article.

11
April 9
Discussion: Biomedical Reporting in the Broadcast Media
Discussion: Biomedical Reporting on the World Wide Web
Viewing and Discussion: A Biomedical Documentary
Core Reading Due:
• text: Chapter 9 (“Medical Reporting for the Electronic Media” by Tom Linden)

Writing Due: draft of overview feature
Draft a feature article providing an overview of a biomedical topic. The article should run about 1000 to 1500 words (about four to six double-spaced pages). At the beginning, specify the site for which the feature is intended, and note the word count. At the end, list sources used. Please submit your draft in duplicate, so a classmate can prepare a constructive critique of it as the next assignment. (Note: This draft will not be graded, but it is required. Failure to submit it will result in subtraction of 10 points from the grade on the final version of the article.)
Exercises Due:
Do the exercises on pages 265-266 and on page 280. You need not hand in your answers, but you should be ready to discuss them in class.

Writing Due: overview feature
(See instructions above.)

Unit VI: Concluding Items

14
Apr 30
Discussion: Careers, Professional Organizations, and Educational Opportunities
Workshop: Final Project Wrap-Up

Core Reading Due:
- text: Chapters 15 (“Career Options”), 16 (“Professional Organizations”), and 17 (“Educational Opportunities”)

Exercises Due:
Do exercise 1 on page 303, exercise 3 on page 304, exercises 1-3 on pages 311-312, and exercise 3 on page 324. You need not hand in your answers, but you should be ready to discuss them in class.

Writing Due: final project
Please do one of the following:
(1) Write a feature story on a biomedical topic. The story may be for any medium; it should draw on a range of sources and run about 2000 words. At the beginning of the story, specify the site for which it is intended and the word count. At the end, list the sources used. If appropriate, supply illustrations or ideas for illustrations.
(2) Write a paper on an aspect of biomedical reporting of professional interest to you. The paper should be intended for your classmates in this course and should run about 2000 words; it should be informative and readable. At the beginning of the paper, list the word count. At the end, list the sources used.

Note: If desired, the final assignment can be revised after this session and submitted as late as Monday, May 7.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal anti-discrimination statute that provides comprehensive civil rights protection for persons with disabilities. Among other things, this legislation requires that all students with disabilities be guaranteed a learning environment that provides for reasonable accommodation of their disabilities. If you believe you have a disability requiring an accommodation, please contact the Office of Disability Services in Cain Hall, Room B118, or call 845-1637.

As the Aggie Honor Code states, “An Aggie does not lie, cheat, or steal or tolerate those who do.” It is expected that you will neither give nor receive unauthorized aid on work in this course. All writing for this course must be your original work. For Texas A&M Honor Council Rules and Procedures, please see www.tamu.edu/aggiehonor.