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Appointments in person, by Zoom, and by phone are readily available. Also feel free to drop in if I'm in the office and not meeting with someone else.

VIBS 663.600
Biomedical Reporting
Texas A&M University
Fall 2023, Wednesdays, 8:45 to 11:30 a.m.
VIDI 127

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. Other goals include strengthening your information-gathering and general writing skills, promoting critical thinking, enhancing your editing ability, and increasing your knowledge of medicine, biomedical research, and biomedical institutions.

These goals will be pursued through classroom activities, readings, discussion posts (which often will include exercises), and, of course, writing assignments. Because much of your and others' learning will depend on your participation, you are expected to attend class regularly. Normally, no more than two class sessions should be missed. However, if you are ill, please stay home; you can join us by Zoom if your condition permits.

The required book, provided free of charge, is *Health Writer's Handbook*, 2nd edition, by Barbara Gastel (Ames, Iowa: Blackwell Publishing, 2005). Other readings will include articles on and examples of biomedical reporting. Core readings are noted on the schedule below, and other readings will be announced in class. In addition, please follow current biomedical reporting in various media and share pertinent items with classmates in the show-and-tell section in Canvas and in class.

You also are encouraged to meet with the instructor at least twice during the course for conferences on your writing. Typically, one conference should be before the middle of the semester 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:

<u>Assignment</u>	<u>Due</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Equivalent in Points</u>
medical terminology exercise	8/29	5%	100
analysis of a medical news story	9/5	5%	100
story based on journal article	9/12	5%	100
story based on presentation	9/19	5%	100
oral report on journal article (#1)	9/26	5%	100
story based on interview	10/3	10%	200
oral report on journal article (#2)	10/10	5%	100
analysis of a biomedical feature article	10/31	5%	100
(near-final draft of major assignment	11/7)		
constructive critique of classmate's draft	11/14	10%	200
major assignment	11/29	35%	700
discussion posts/exercises		10%	200
*Discussion posts/exercises usually will be due at 5 p.m. Sunday.		100%	2000
Written assignments usually will be due at noon Tuesday.			

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.

At the end of each writing assignment, list all resources used in preparing it. Examples include materials read, people interviewed, grammar checkers used, artificial intelligence (AI) tools used, and people who provided feedback on drafts. If you used AI, also provide your prompt(s) and a copy of the output.

Grading will be as follows:

A	95-100	(highly professional)
A	90-94	(approaching professional quality)
B	85-89	(good overall)
B	80-84	(fairly good)
C	70-79	(marginal)
D	60-69	(poor)
F	<60	(unacceptable)

For all assignments, both content and style will be considered. An average of 89.50 or above will earn a final grade of A, an average of 79.50 to 89.49 will earn a B, and so forth.

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 December 1.

Communication outside of class sessions will be mainly by email. Therefore, please check your Texas A&M University email at least once a day. When emailing about class items, please start the subject line with VIBS 663 (example: VIBS 663—Question about Reading).

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

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

(Final instructions for reading and writing assignments will appear in the weekly modules in Canvas. The course may include at least one additional guest segment; suggestions in that regard are welcome.)

Session/Date Main Activities and Assignments

Unit I: Introduction to Biomedical Reporting

1 Aug 23	Introduction: The Participants and the Course Discussion: The Scope of Biomedical Reporting Introductory Thoughts: Health-Writing Technique Presentation/Discussion: Presenting Medical Content in Plain Language (Exercise If Time Permits: A Medical Mystery)
2 Aug 30	Discussion: Some Elements of Medical Terminology Discussion: Who's Who—Some Health Professions Introduction: Sources of Story Ideas and Information Discussion: Writing Medical News Stories and News Releases Overview: Medical Writing for Magazines—Where and How (Exercise If Time Permits: A Medical Mystery) Core Reading Due:

- text: Chapter 1 (“Some Basics”), Chapter 7 (“Health-Writing Technique”), pp. 123-top of 126 (“News Stories and News Releases”), examples on pp. 127-135
- Rafinski, Karen. Getting picky about medical research stories: how to choose. HealthBeat, Spring 2000, pp. 6-7.
- Rice, Sabriya. Medicine; Branswell, Helen. Infectious Diseases; and Belluz, Julia. Public Health. In: Blum, Deborah, et al, editors. *A Tactical Guide to Science Journalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022.
- “Basic Elements of Medical Terms” (handout)

Browsing Due:

- “Healthcare Occupations” (<http://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/>)

Due: medical terminology homework

This homework will be provided in Canvas.

Unit II: Sources of Story Ideas and Information

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Sep 6

Guest Segment: Some Chances to Write for Publication or Posting:

Lindsey Hendrix, Marketing & Communications Manager, Texas A&M Health

Discussion: Writing Assignment Due Today

Discussion: Books and Periodicals as Sources

Presentation: The Structure of Scientific Papers: A Targeted Review

Demo: In the EQUATOR Network: Guidelines Useful for Researchers and Reporters

Workshop: Some Major Medical Journals; News Sections of Journals

Core Reading Due:

- text: Chapter 2 (“Books and Periodicals”)
- Khamsi, Roxanne. Problems with preprints: covering rough-draft manuscripts responsibly. The Open Notebook, 1 June 2020, available at <https://www.theopennotebook.com/2020/06/01/problems-with-preprints-covering-rough-draft-manuscripts-responsibly/>.

Optional Reading:

- Chapters 7-22 in *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper*, 9th edition, by Barbara Gastel and Robert A. Day (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2022). (Note: This book can be accessed electronically from the Texas A&M library.)

Writing Due: analysis of a medical news story

Read the medical news story distributed in class for this assignment, and consider it in the context of material read for or discussed in class. Using the examples on pages 127-135 of the textbook as models, write comments about the content and crafting of the story. Be ready to discuss the story in class.

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Sep 13

Discussion: Government, Associations, and Other Institutions as Sources

Discussion: Exercises and Writing Assignment Due Today

In Class-Exercise: Reviewing the Programs of Some Conferences in Biomedical Science, Veterinary and Human Medicine, and Medical Communication

Discussion: Some Conference Coverage

Core Reading Due:

- text: Chapter 3 (“Government, Associations, and Other Institutions”)

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 or provide a link

to the article.

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Sep 20

Discussion: Researchers, Clinicians, Patients, and Other People as Sources—
Advice on Interviewing and Being Interviewed
Introduction to Writing Assignment: Story Based on Interview
Discussion: Online Resources
Tips: Giving Oral Presentations Online
Discussion: Exercises and Writing Assignment Due Today

Core Reading Due:

- text: Chapter 4 (“Researchers, Clinicians, Patients, and Others”) and Chapter 5 (“Online Resources”)
- Ask TON: finding patients. The Open Notebook, 6 October 2015, available at <https://www.theopennotebook.com/2015/10/06/ask-ton-finding-patients/>.
- Wu, Katherine J. How to find patient stories on social media. The Open Notebook, 11 August 2020, available at <https://www.theopennotebook.com/2020/08/11/how-to-find-patient-stories-on-social-media/>.
- Hardach, Sophie. Interviewing sources about traumatic experiences. The Open Notebook, 16 July 2019, available at <https://www.theopennotebook.com/2019/07/16/interviewing-sources-about-traumatic-experiences/>.
- “Please Don’t Ignore Me: Requesting Interviews with Scientists” by Karen Kwon (*The Open Notebook*, 14 September 2021, available at <https://www.theopennotebook.com/2021/09/14/please-dont-ignore-me-requesting-interviews-with-scientists/>)
- SciLine. <https://www.sciline.org/>
- Medical Library Association. For Health Consumers and Patients: MLA Top Health Websites. <https://www.mlanet.org/page/top-health-websites>

Writing Due: news story based on presentation

Attend a presentation on a biomedical topic or watch one online. 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 it is intended. If you draw on sources other than the presentation, please list them at the end of the story.

Unit III: Evaluating Biomedical Information

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Sep 27

Oral Reports: Journal Articles on Medical Journalism

Discussion: Evaluating Medical Information—Some Basics
Discussion: Exercises Due Today
Introduction: The Major Writing Assignment for This Course
Progress Reports: Writing Assignment Due Next Week

Core Reading Due:

- text: Chapter 6 (“Evaluating Information”)
- Sheikh, Knvul. How to vet industry PR claims. The Open Notebook, 26 March 2019, available at <https://www.theopennotebook.com/2019/03/26/how-to-vet-industry-pr-claims/>.
- Begley, Sharon. Sharon Begley’s brief guide to writing medical news. The Open Notebook, 2 February 2016, available at <https://www.theopennotebook.com/2016/02/02/sharon-begley-brief-guide-to-writing-medical-news/>.
- a journal article on medical journalism (details to be provided in class)

7
Oct 4

Workshop: Writing for Today
Discussion: Reading for Today
Discussion: Exercises Due Today

Core Reading Due:

- text: Chapter 14 ("Presenting Risk")

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.

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Oct 11

Oral Reports: Journal Articles on Medical Journalism

Discussion: Reading Due Today
Introduction: Health-Writing Style and Genres
Discussion: Plans for Major Writing Assignment

Core Reading Due:

- Lang, Tom. Common statistical errors even you can find. (Three articles.) AMWA Journal 2003, 2004.
- Marciel, Kelli K., and Kramer, Barnett S. The logic of cancer screening: the clash of medical science and intuition. AMWA [American Medical Writers Association] Journal 2001;16(4):12-18.
- one or more stories dealing with statistics and risk
- a journal article on medical journalism (details to be provided in class)

Optional Writing Due:

If you wish, you can revise your interview story on the basis of feedback received during the workshop last week. If you do so, the revised version, rather than the one submitted initially, will be graded.

Unit IV: Health-Writing Style and Genres

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Oct 18

Discussion: Health-Writing Style
Discussion: Some Health-Related Feature Articles

Guest Segment: Callie Rainosek, Communications Specialist, Salud America! [at UT San Antonio] (MS, STJR, 2019)

Core Reading Due:

- text: Chapter 7 (review it), pp. 138-143 ("The Feature Article Family"), and Chapter 10 ("Sensitivity and Style")
- Zamzow, Rachel. Writing well about disability. The Open Notebook, 24 October 2017, available at <https://www.theopennotebook.com/2017/10/24/writing-well-about-disability/>.
- Rehmeyer, Julie. How to report with accuracy and sensitivity on contested illnesses. The Open Notebook, 26 January 2021, available at <https://www.theopennotebook.com/2021/01/26/how-to-report-with-accuracy-and-sensitivity-on-contested-illnesses/>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Health Equity Guiding Principles for Inclusive Communication. August 2021. Available at https://www.cdc.gov/healthcommunication/Health_Equity.html.

- some examples of feature articles
- some writing by the guest speaker

Writing Due: none

Please be working on your major assignment.

(10
Oct 25)

Because of the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) annual conference, class will not meet this week. Plans for alternative activities will be announced.

11
Nov 1

Discussion: Some Highlights of the AMWA Annual Conference

Discussion: Investigative Reporting on Medicine and Health

Discussion: Some Other Genres of Biomedical Writing

Progress Reports: Major Writing Assignment

Guest Segment: Linda Wang, Writer, National Cancer Institute (MS, STJR, 2001)

Core Reading Due:

- text: pp. 126, 136-138 (“Investigative and Depth Reporting”), p. 143 (“Other Article Genres”), pp. 143-145 (“Books”)
- Eban, Katherine. Investigative science journalism. *and* Morisy, Michael. Accessing public records. In: *A Tactical Guide to Science Journalism*.
- some investigative stories on medical topics
- some writing by the guest speaker

Writing Due: analysis of a biomedical feature article

Identify a biomedical feature article that you consider of generally high quality. Please check with the instructor to make sure the article qualifies for the assignment. 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 or link to the article.

Unit V: Some Key Issues and Areas (and More)

12
Nov 8

Discussion: Class Members’ Experience Drafting the Final Project

Discussion: Covering Key Realms

In-Class Exercise(s): Covering Key Realms

Discussion: Ethical Issues

Core Reading Due:

- text: Chapter 13 (“Covering Key Realms”)
- Moynihan, Roy. Tipsheet for reporting on drugs, devices and medical technologies.
- Lieberman, Trudy. Covering medical technology: the seven deadly sins. *Columbia Journalism Review*, September/October 2001, pp. 24-28.
- “Reporting on Health Disparities” by Jyoti Madhusoodanan, *The Open Notebook*, 23 November 2021, available at <https://www.theopennotebook.com/2021/11/23/reporting-on-health-disparities/>.
- “Covering Substance Use and Addiction Responsibly” by Rachel Crowell. *The Open Notebook*, 16 May 2023, <https://www.theopennotebook.com/2023/05/16/covering-substance-use-and-addiction-responsibly/>
- “Reporting on Assistive Technology” by Amanda Morris. *The Open Notebook*, 7 March 2023, <https://www.theopennotebook.com/2023/03/07/reporting-on-assistive-technology/>
- text: Chapter 12 (“Ethical and Legal Issues”)
- Statement of Principles of the Association of Health Care Journalists

(<http://www.healthjournalism.org/secondarypage-details.php?id=56>)

Writing Due: near-final draft of major assignment

As your major assignment, 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, provide 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.

Notes: (1) This draft will not be graded, but it must be submitted on time, and it must be complete. For each day that the draft is late or incomplete, 10 points will be deducted from the grade on the final version of the assignment. (2) You are encouraged to meet with the instructor to discuss your draft.

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Nov 15

Workshop: Writing Assignment Due Today

Discussion: Biomedical Reporting in the Broadcast Media

Discussion: Award Winners and Awards

Viewing (or Listening) and Discussion: Some Broadcast Biomedical Reporting

Core Reading Due:

- text: Chapter 9 ("Medical Reporting for the Electronic Media" by Tom Linden)
- Krulwich, Robert. Sticky storytelling. In: Winburn, Jan, editor. *Shop Talk and War Stories: American Journalists Examine Their Profession*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003.
- text: Chapter 11 ("Award Winners and Awards")
- examples of award-winning biomedical reporting for various media
- if class members desire: some reading on regulatory writing

Writing Due: constructive critique of classmate's near-final draft

Prepare a constructive critique of the near-final draft of a classmate's major assignment. The critique should both note strengths and suggest improvements.

Please submit

- a copy of the draft with feedback written on it
- a memo presenting comments and suggestions to the author

Unit VI: Concluding Items

14
Nov 29

Discussion: Careers, Professional Organizations, and Educational Opportunities

In-Class Exercises on the Above Topics

Discussion: Final Project

Wrap-Up

Core Reading Due:

- text: Chapters 15 ("Career Options"), 16 ("Professional Organizations"), and 17 ("Educational Opportunities")
- Sugg, Diana K. Conquering the beat (instead of letting it rule you). In: Winburn, Jan, editor. *Shop Talk and War Stories: American Journalists Examine Their Profession*. Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2003.

Writing Due: major assignment

Required University Statements

Attendance Policy

The university views class attendance and participation as an individual student responsibility. Students are expected to attend class and to complete all assignments.

Please refer to [Student Rule 7](#) in its entirety for information about excused absences, including definitions, and related documentation and timelines.

Makeup Work Policy

Students will be excused from attending class on the day of a graded activity or when attendance contributes to a student's grade, for the reasons stated in Student Rule 7, or other reason deemed appropriate by the instructor.

Please refer to [Student Rule 7](#) in its entirety for information about makeup work, including definitions, and related documentation and timelines.

Absences related to Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 may necessitate a period of more than 30 days for make-up work, and the timeframe for make-up work should be agreed upon by the student and instructor" ([Student Rule 7, Section 7.4.1](#)).

"The instructor is under no obligation to provide an opportunity for the student to make up work missed because of an unexcused absence" ([Student Rule 7, Section 7.4.2](#)).

Students who request an excused absence are expected to uphold the Aggie Honor Code and Student Conduct Code. (See [Student Rule 24](#).)

Academic Integrity Statement and Policy

"An Aggie does not lie, cheat or steal, or tolerate those who do."

"Texas A&M University students are responsible for authenticating all work submitted to an instructor. If asked, students must be able to produce proof that the item submitted is indeed the work of that student. Students must keep appropriate records at all times. The inability to authenticate one's work, should the instructor request it, may be sufficient grounds to initiate an academic misconduct case" ([Section 20.1.2.3, Student Rule 20](#)).

You can learn more about the Aggie Honor System Office Rules and Procedures, academic integrity, and your rights and responsibilities at aggiehonor.tamu.edu.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Policy

Texas A&M University is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for

all students. If you experience barriers to your education due to a disability or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Resources office on your campus (resources listed below) Disabilities may include, but are not limited to attentional, learning, mental health, sensory, physical, or chronic health conditions. All students are encouraged to discuss their disability related needs with Disability Resources and their instructors as soon as possible.

Disability Resources is located in the Student Services Building or at (979) 845-1637 or visit disability.tamu.edu.

Title IX and Statement on Limits to Confidentiality

Texas A&M University is committed to fostering a learning environment that is safe and productive for all. University policies and federal and state laws prohibit gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment, including sexual assault, sexual exploitation, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking.

With the exception of some medical and mental health providers, all university employees (including full and part-time faculty, staff, paid graduate assistants, student workers, etc.) are Mandatory Reporters and must report to the Title IX Office if the employee experiences, observes, or becomes aware of an incident that meets the following conditions (see [University Rule 08.01.01.M1](#)):

- The incident is reasonably believed to be discrimination or harassment.
- The incident is alleged to have been committed by or against a person who, at the time of the incident, was (1) a student enrolled at the University or (2) an employee of the University.

Mandatory Reporters must file a report regardless of how the information comes to their attention – including but not limited to face-to-face conversations, a written class assignment or paper, class discussion, email, text, or social media post. Although Mandatory Reporters must file a report, in most instances, a person who is subjected to the alleged conduct will be able to control how the report is handled, including whether or not to pursue a formal investigation. The University's goal is to make sure you are aware of the range of options available to you and to ensure access to the resources you need.

Students wishing to discuss concerns in a confidential setting are encouraged to make an appointment with [Counseling and Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#).

Students can learn more about filing a report, accessing supportive resources, and navigating the Title IX investigation and resolution process on the University's [Title IX webpage](#).

Statement on Mental Health and Wellness

Texas A&M University recognizes that mental health and wellness are critical factors that influence a student's academic success and overall wellbeing. Students are encouraged to

engage in healthy self-care by utilizing available resources and services on your campus

Students who need someone to talk to can contact Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS) or call the TAMU Helpline (979-845-2700) from 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. weekdays and 24 hours on weekends. 24-hour emergency help is also available through the National Suicide Prevention Hotline (800-273-8255) or at [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](https://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org).