

Environmental Studies 73 93W
Environmental Journalism
Tu-Th: 10-11:50 AM: 224 Baker

Instructor:
Dana Meadows
305A Steele
HB 6182
office phone 2838
home phone 1-675-2230



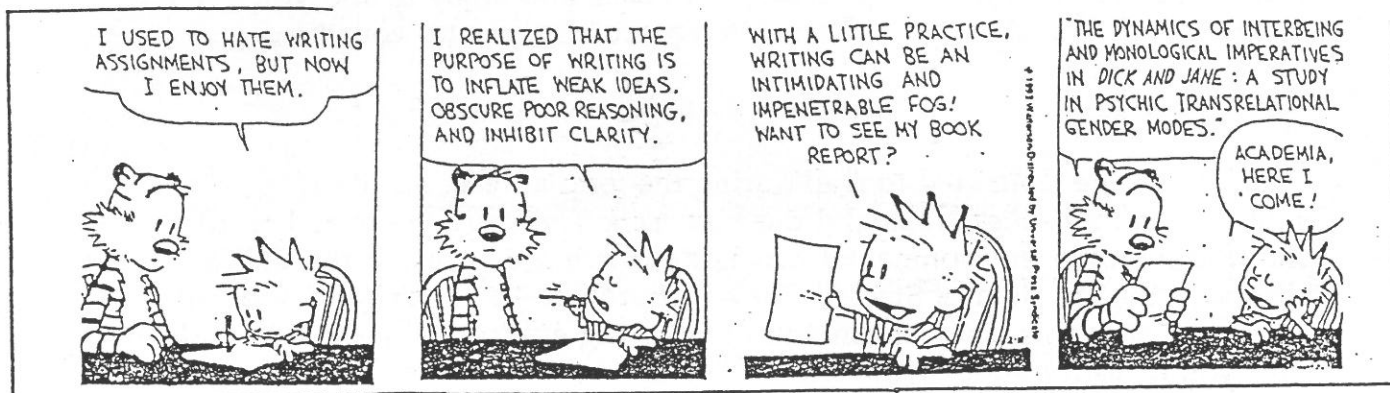
This course is a workshop on environmental journalism. It is not a training course for a journalism career; rather, its primary purpose is to give you experience in expository and persuasive writing on environmental subjects *at the professional level*. I've italicized that last phrase because professionalism is the distinguishing characteristic of this course. It means that your writing will be judged not as "student writing," but as serious, adult writing of a quality to be published in the commercial media.

Another purpose of the course is to increase your substantive knowledge of environmental science and policy. You may be surprised to discover how much greater your command of a subject will be after you've explained it in writing to a general audience.

A third purpose is to acquaint you with some of the lively environmental journalism going on around you in magazines, newspapers, radio, and television, and to enhance your ability to take in information from the media with a critical eye.

And there is yet a fourth purpose. That is to include you in the ongoing discussion within the profession about ethics and standards for journalism in general and environmental journalism in particular. What is a reliable source? What are the rules about quotes, about paraphrases, about violating confidences? Should a journalist be an advocate? What responsibility do the media have to "present all sides"? Are the media in fact "neutral"? Can they be?

By the way, forget about the trick, already explored by some of your predecessors, of meeting a deadline for this course by submitting a piece you've written for another course. "Student" writing for academic purposes just does not work as journalism. You may decide to write on a topic you've researched for another course, but the writing itself will have to be of professional quality and appropriate for the general public, or it won't fly. Footnotes are unnecessary in this course, except in your own records. Clarity and readability are in!



3. Writing a lot

I expect you to submit one piece of writing, newly written or rewritten, *every Thursday at 10:00:00 AM* (as determined by the ringing of the Baker bells). You may submit your pieces on paper at the beginning of the Thursday class or over e-mail before that class. They will be edited and returned to you as quickly as possible -- by the following Tuesday's class at the latest.

4. Rewriting

I will read your pieces as a strict, curmudgeonly editor and will mark them accordingly. They will come back to you not with grades, but with comments, queries, suggestions, rants about dangling participles, and outbursts of admiration or pain. You are the author; you never have to follow my suggestions (except about dangling participles), but you should be sure you understand them and take them into account as you rewrite. As you begin to submit your pieces to real editors, you will run across much tougher critics -- they're the ones who have taught me to be tough by ripping apart my writing!

If you have not done professional writing before, you may be appalled at how much rewriting you will have to do. Let me assure you that questioning and testing every word, taking your writing apart and putting it back together again, making it better and even better, is a normal practice of the best, most accomplished, most successful writers.

You can rewrite a piece and resubmit it as often as you like. Just remember, I would like to see exactly one piece, no more, no less, each week. Use your weekly opportunity to be edited to help you toward your goal of getting several pieces polished enough to submit for publication before the end of the term.

As you work on your writing, you will need to come to your own answers to these questions -- and ENV5 73 will provide you with a forum to try out your answers on your classmates, on me, and eventually the editors to whom you will submit your work.

THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE COURSE

The best evidence of your success in this course would be to have a piece of your writing accepted, published, and paid for by a professional newspaper or magazine. The course is structured to maximize the possibility of that happening. That means you will be required:

1. to write in a number of different formats for a number of possible publications,
2. to write about subjects that really interest you,
3. to write a lot,
4. to rewrite a lot, and
5. to write to deadline.

1. Formats

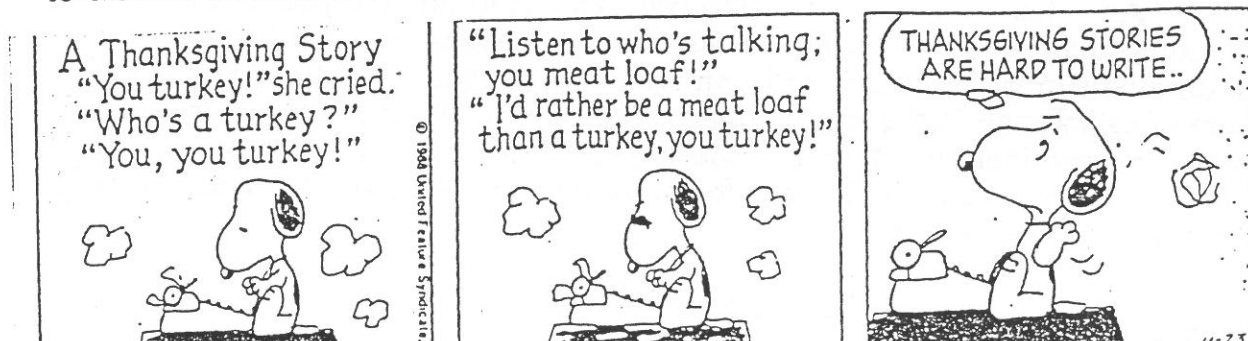
Before the end of the term, you are expected to write at least four pieces for possible publication:

- A piece of straight journalistic reporting,
- An opinion column,
- A piece of investigative reporting of feature length, for a magazine or newspaper,
- A reflective essay.

Of course you can write more than one piece in any of these categories, if you like. You may write them at any time during the term and submit them in any order, though I will make suggestions about timing that I think will help you pace your work sanely.

2. Subjects

You will do your best writing on a subject that deeply interests you and for an audience you really want to reach. I may suggest topics from time to time, but you make the ultimate choice. We will hold frequent "story conferences" in class to help you begin generating ideas. These ideas belong to you, unless you "assign" them to someone else. I strongly urge you to be thinking of story ideas constantly, and to keep a notebook for jotting them down and sketching them out. It helps to "toss around" ideas for awhile and to discuss them with others before committing yourself.



5. Writing to deadline

In journalism deadlines are absolute. At some point the presses roll, whether or not you slept late, whether or not you have a cold, whether or not the computer ate your disk the night before. Professional journalists make contingency plans for late nights, colds, and eaten disks. They meet deadlines without arguments, without excuses. The only way to teach you this discipline is to require it of you.

Therefore *late papers will NOT be accepted*. I mean that. I will not read any papers arriving after the final bell tone at the beginning of each Thursday's class. Don't fight this rule; lean back and enjoy it, and you'll find that the discipline of meeting deadlines can actually free up your life.

READINGS

You are encouraged to read during the term at least one daily newspaper (the *Valley News* and the *New York Times* are the ones I read) and one monthly environmental magazine (there are many in the ENVS library on the 3rd floor of Steele). They will provide you with good and bad examples of journalism, inform you of breaking environmental news, and give you ideas for your own work.

I have asked you to buy four texts for this course. One of them is a manual that most professional writers consider essential: Strunk and White's, *The Elements of Style*. This book contains all the important grammatical and stylistic rules in a short space, with pithy illustrations of right and wrong usage. I commend to you especially Rule 11 (on dangling participles), Rule 17 (on conciseness) and Rule 19 (on parallel constructions). As a bonus you get White's brilliant introduction and his conclusion "An Approach to Style." These little essays contain a lot of writing wisdom, and they demonstrate that wisdom through the excellence of their own composition. Most serious writers have worked through this book so often that they almost know it by heart.

The *Boston Globe's* book *Writing for Your Readers* will show you how working journalists talk to themselves about the art of writing. Like Strunk and White, it's a book to read through and then to keep around for reference. Its lists of tricks for coming up with topics, for writing good leads, and for organizing are all good to turn to when you're stuck.

News and Numbers by Victor Cohn is especially useful for environmental writers and others who deal with the scientific side of the news. It lays out the pitfalls in statistics, polls, probabilities, and other ways in which numbers creep into, and often distort, media reports. For those of you with scientific training, it will be full of suggestions for how to use that training to communicate what you know clearly and understandably to a lay audience. For those of you without much science, it will relieve you by pointing out how a little common sense and persistent questioning can unravel a lot of jargon and obfuscation.

GRADES

In this class you grade yourself, through the quality of your own performance, as judged by professional editors. My role as instructor is to be your coach, to help as many of you as possible get As. Therefore, please know that you have no obligation to please me in this course, and that you are not in competition with each other. You are invited to help each other, give each other constructive criticism, work cooperatively, as the staff of an environmental publication would (or should, anyway). Environmental journalism needs all of us, working at our best. Your struggle here is not with each other, but with your own thoughts and with the English language.

Here's how your grade will be determined:

- If you meet all deadlines and complete all four pieces or more, your grade will be B.
- For every piece you don't complete, your grade will go down by one full grade (B to C, C to D, etc.).
- If you have a piece from this course published in *Sense of Place*, the D, or another campus publication, your grade will go up by one point (B to B+, etc.). (This way of raising your grade can be applied at most once.)
- If you submit four (4) rejection letters (they can all be for a single piece) showing that you tried for commercial publication four times, your grade will go up one point. (Rejection letters are badges of courage in this profession.)
- If a piece you have written for this class is accepted by a commercial publication (for pay), your grade will go up two points.

In order to give you time to get your work published, *the grade I will submit for all of you at the end of winter term will be an Incomplete.* You will have until the end of spring term to get anything you write for this course accepted for publication.

PEANUTS

Dear Contributor,



We are returning your manuscript. It does not suit our present needs.



P.S. We note that you sent your story by first class mail.



Junk mail may be sent third class.



TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

This schedule is subject to change as opportunities, challenges, class needs, the instructor's whims, or the outbreak of major news may dictate.

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| WHAT TO WRITE? | Tuesday Jan 4 -- Introductions, settle class size, edit the professor. <i>Study the structure & style of news reports.</i> | Thursday Jan 6 -- NEWS REPORT #1 DUE Writing from the senses. <i>Read <u>Writing for Your Readers</u>. Collect ideas for story conference.</i> |
| | Jan 11 -- Writing leads, discuss <u>Writing for Your Readers</u> . STORY CONFERENCE. | Jan 13 -- NEWS REPT #2 DUE Writing from the intellect. <i>Finish <u>Writing for Your Readers</u>.</i> |
| HOW TO WRITE IT? | Jan 18 -- STORY CONFERENCE What is an opinion column? <i>Study the style of columns.</i> | Jan 20 -- COLUMN #1 DUE Leads and ends. <i>Read Strunk & White.</i> |
| | Jan 25 -- Writing rant. Exercise in writing in class. Concluding paragraphs. | Jan 27 -- COLUMN #2 DUE Writing from the heart. <i>Read Strunk & White and reflective essays.</i> |
| HOW TO SELL IT? WHY BOTHER? | Feb 1 -- STORY CONFERENCE The Conte Reserve story -- pro | Feb 3 -- REFL. ESSAY DUE Writing from wisdom. <i>Read <u>News & Numbers</u></i> |
| | Feb 8 -- STORY CONFERENCE The Conte Reserve story -- con | Feb 10 -- REFL. ESSAY DUE Dealing with numbers. <i>Finish <u>News & Numbers</u></i> |
| | Feb 15 -- STORY CONFERENCE Selling your story | Feb 17 -- INV. REPORT DRAFT #1 DUE. <i>Read <u>Media & The Env.</u>, Ryan, Detjen, LaMay, Smith.</i> |
| | Feb 22 -- Writing to make a difference. Journalism and advocacy | Feb 24-- INV. REPORT DRAFT #2 DUE. A report from the trenches. <i>Read <u>Media & the Env.</u>, Dennis, Meadows, Daly.</i> |
| | Mar 1 -- PUBLICATION PLANS Writing into and from a paradigm | Mar 3 -- INV. REPORT, FINAL DRAFT DUE. |
| | Mar 8 -- Summary, conclusion, course evaluation. | |

Environmental Journalism 73:

Here are some things to remember:

Most stories are tough to read for two reasons: The writer forgets that people, not abstractions, take action; the writer has only a dim idea of what the central focus of the story is. Every piece of writing --poem, play, novel, news article, etc. -- must clearly answer the question: What is this about? Your readers will ask: "Why am I reading this?"

When you propose a story idea to someone, include the central question. If an editor suggests a story, get the central question from him/her. This becomes your research question and the point around which all other questions turn. The question -- focus -- will probably change somewhat as the story evolves.

Keep this central question in mind as you do your research and interviewing. Ask everyone this question. When you sit down to write, this question forms the heart of your story. You may want to put it on paper and keep it in front of you. Its language may appear in your "turn" or "nut" paragraph. The question must appear in your story in some form, but not necessarily as a question.

Around this core, focus on events, people, details, color. Pile up the particulars of a story in an interesting way. Put people into your leads and make/let them act. Weave in a "trifle" or two that helps us understand your story and its people. Tie lead and ending together, always, in either direction. Remember: You do not have to start writing at the lead and continue to the end. Start writing at the point of greatest strength -- most information, central descriptive section, etc. -- and write to the end. Take a word or two from the end, bring them around to your lead, and finish the story.

If I had to choose, I would prefer a strong ending. You can confect a lead with a strong ending, and a good ending -- with a clear story focus -- increases reader enthusiasm for your writing. Readers will come looking for you next time.

Young writers make at least two basic mistakes. They don't work hard enough on focusing their central question, and their stories bog down in mush. Or, they "telegraph" the material in their stories. They tell the reader how to feel and react. We get "The exciting world of the country fair" or "the glorious experience." Remember Mark Twain: "Don't say the lady screamed. Bring her in and let her scream."

Describe what you see. Witness events. Use your five senses. Let the reader participate in your writing. Take time to explain the particulars of an event.

Here is what I try to do as a writer:

* Read as much good stuff as possible. Why? Writing is also hearing: you hear rhythm, tone and voice. What you read is what you hear. And what you hear is

what you write. That is also why I urge you to memorize parts of good writing that you read: the King James version of the Bible; Shakespeare, poetry. Force yourself to hear and use good language.

* Notice the way a writer writes a story, or uses an anecdote or describes something.

* Try to create rhythms with your writing. Rhythm in writing is similar to rhythm in music; there are patterns, tones, stresses, beats. Most writing has an irregular metrical pattern, but sometimes it falls into iambic (soft-hard, soft-hard). "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" "I had a farm in Africa, at the foot of the Ngong Hills." Notice how easy it is to read both lines. If I scanned the opening sentence of Out of Africa correctly, it contains four iambs (soft-hard) and concludes with two anapest beats and an iamb. I'm certain this was unintended, but we agree that the sentence sounds nice and reads easily.

Be aware of the rhythm of your writing and how you can control it. Learn how to use it, and how to break it. Do either deliberately. You can break the rhythm of your writing by using several devices: internal anecdote or dialogue; punctuation; changing the sentence structure.

Remember Big Bill Broonzy: "How many things can you do with a knife? You can cut fish, you can cut your toenails. I seen men shave with it, you can eat beans with it, you can kill a man. There. You name five things you can do with a knife, you got five verses. You got yourself a blues."

The one-word sentence -- "There" -- draws a rhythmical line across the paragraph. It stops the reader. What follows is the answer to the question.

Sentences, punctuation, sound, the repetition of words and phrases all create rhythm in your writing. That's why you don't want to waste the opportunity to write well by writing carelessly -- using cliches or repeating words accidentally. You and your writing have a natural, internal rhythm. Listen for it, nurture it, use it.

* Do nothing accidentally.

* Cut all "-ly" words. Cut fad words (optimize, access, throughput, interface, finalize, giftable).

* Challenge yourself: 1/ Ask the "dumb question. 2/ Do "surprise reporting" and make the obvious uncommon. 3/ Put your mark on everything you write by using at least one good verb, phrase, sentence. 4/ Take risks and try new words, rhythms, writing styles. Swoop a little. [END]