HU 3629
Special Topics in Professional Writing:
Science Writing
Spring Semester 2007

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Office Hours: Monday, 3-4:00; Thursday, 1-2:00

Course Title: HU 3629 Science Writing
Course Texts: The Beak of a Finch
Best American Science Writing of 2006
A Field Guide for Science Writers
Field Notes from a Catastrophe
Additional readings

Class Time: 11:05-12:20 Thursday
Class Location: Walker 134
Class Listserv: 3629-l
Class Website: http://www.hu.mtu.edu/~mabrady

Course Description
HU 3629 is designed to broaden your understanding of science writing, which is rhetorical, thus both an art and craft. Doing science writing well means knowing how to tell a good story and how to do the research that makes the story compelling. Science writing depends on an awareness of complex audiences, some of whom love to learn about science and others who use scientific information to enhance their lives. Stories about technology, evolution, advances against disease, a deeper appreciation of the natural world and the latest nutrition study fill our pages and airwaves. Yet these reports often lack perspective or a skillful approach to help us grasp their significance. Science communication is thus a vital bridge between two cultures: scientists and the public.

Course Goals

1. To introduce you to some of the finest science writers of the 20th and 21st centuries
2. To discuss the genres, strategies, and rhetorical practices that these writers use
3. To offer examples of the types of audiences who read science writing, their purposes and needs
4. To examine the backbone of science writing, narrative structure
5. To give you practice in generating science narratives
6. To engage you in the research necessary to tell these stories
More specifically, we’ll be reading journalists, academics, editors, and independent correspondents identified as the best science writers of 2006. We’ll also read an independent science writer awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his book-length description of contemporary work in evolution and a distinguished writer in residence at New York University who recounts the mystery of a cholera outbreak in 19th century London.

At least four professionals have agreed to discuss their views on writing as it offers a bridge between their work and the general public: a chemist, a surgeon, an expert on wolves, and a technical writer.

Course Requirements

Readings
I expect you to read the texts assigned in the syllabus before the class session and to be prepared to actively and thoughtfully discuss the topics for a given session. Additional readings may be assigned during the semester for which you will be responsible.

Written Assignments
Although I may modify the assignment topics and due dates during the semester, I plan to ask you to write five substantive pieces:

1. One focusing on a contemporary issue of your choice;
2. A second focusing on a person and her or his work;
3. A third historical narrative;
4. A fourth grant proposal;
5. And a fifth collaborative piece on a “case.”

All of these will require shorter documents, such as project proposals, progress reports, and transmittal memos. I’ll also give you practice in abstract, summary, and synthesis writing, all of which you need to write “science.”

Academic honesty
Unless the assignment calls for a collaborative effort, I expect that the work you submit to me will be yours. If you are referring to or using other sources, acknowledge them, using proper MLA form. Evidence of copied or plagiarized work is cause for serious disciplinary action by the University. If you have questions about your work with other sources, see me. I consider learning how to document sources a challenge; if you don’t remember how to do this—or never learned—this is the class to secure that technique.

Attendance
I expect you to attend every class meeting and every conference, ready to participate fully and thoughtfully. If you miss more than three of our classes or individual meetings, I will drop your final grade. If you must be absent, please email me or speak with me in person.

Grading
You can earn an A or B in this class if you complete all assignments and reach deadlines, do quality work, and show some genuine commitment. You’ll earn a C if you meet deadlines with satisfactory effort or if some of your assignments are incomplete.
You’ll receive a D or F if your assignments are poorly executed or overdue, or if your attendance, participation, or effort is unsatisfactory.

Grading Standards

**A—truly excellent.** A work is an example of highly effective professional writing. It makes its purposes clear, reflects concern for its audience’s needs and responses, and is detailed, persuasive, effectively organized, exhibits appropriate format and tone, and is grammatically correct.

**B—very good.** B work is effective and would succeed in most professional communication circumstances. It may lack the polish or effectiveness of an A.

**C—satisfactory.** C work is effective though it lacks features necessary to succeed completely with a professional audience. Its purpose may not be entirely clear, it may not be effectively organized, it may not exhibit an appropriate tone or format, or it entails grammatical errors that make it difficult to read or understand than necessary.

**D—poor.** D work does not communicate effectively for several reasons. It may display an inadequate understanding of purpose or audience. It may lack information or be unpersuasive. Its organization may be confusing or misleading, and its tone or format may be inappropriate. It may be difficult to understand or contain serious errors in grammar.

**F—unacceptable.** F work does not satisfy the requirements of the assignment.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A—truly excellent</th>
<th>B—very good</th>
<th>C—satisfactory</th>
<th>D—poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meets assignment</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Most aspects</td>
<td>Significant gaps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argument</td>
<td>Interestingly &amp; clearly advanced</td>
<td>Clearly advanced</td>
<td>May be good, but only implied</td>
<td>Ambiguous or absent, generic or trite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Valid &amp; sufficient support provided</td>
<td>Some gaps or weak support</td>
<td>Some support, but weak or not clearly relevant</td>
<td>Poor support or connections not shown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insight</td>
<td>Original &amp; creative</td>
<td>Demonstrates thought</td>
<td>Conventional or generic</td>
<td>Superficial or incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Logical ordering</td>
<td>Establishes &amp; follows a pattern</td>
<td>Follows a pattern</td>
<td>Generally follows a pattern; some gaps</td>
<td>Unapparent pattern or hard to follow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paragraphs</td>
<td>Coherent &amp; unified</td>
<td>Usually coherent and unified</td>
<td>Some incoherent or not unified</td>
<td>Incoherent or lacking unity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitions</td>
<td>Provided as needed</td>
<td>Provided as needed</td>
<td>Sometimes missing</td>
<td>Enough missing to cause confusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Style</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentences</td>
<td>Correct &amp; varied, according to meaning</td>
<td>Correct, with some variety</td>
<td>Correct, but elementary</td>
<td>Surface errors, such as comma splices or fragments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diction</td>
<td>Precise, correct, creative</td>
<td>Correct</td>
<td>Some debatable word choices</td>
<td>Frequent misuse of words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>Correct</td>
<td>Correct</td>
<td>Very few mistakes</td>
<td>Misspellings confuse meaning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Additional Information**

**MTU’s Policy on Discrimination and Harassment**

MTU complies with all federal and state laws and regulations regarding discrimination, including the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. If you have a disability and need reasonable accommodation for equal access to education and services at MTU, please call Dr. Gloria Melton, Associate Dean of Students (7-2212). For other concerns about discrimination, you may contact your advisor, department chair or the Affirmative Action Office (7-3310).

**Safe Place**

Safe Place’s Mission Statement is: “The GLBT Safe Place Program strives to reduce homophobia and heterosexism on Michigan Tech’s campus. Through education, advocacy, and awareness, the program contributes to an open campus climate that is safe and accepting to all members of the University community” (from www.safeplace.mtu.edu). I am a member of Safe Place.