HU 3629
Special Topics in Professional Writing:
Science Writing
Spring Semester 2009

Ann Brady, Ph.D.
STC/A Program Director

Office: Walker 329-A
Phone: 487-2066
Email: mabrady@mtu.edu
Office Hours: Monday, 2-3:00; Thursday, 12:30-1:30
By appointment

Course Title: HU 3629 Science Writing
Course Texts:
Best American Science Writing of 2008
The Ghost Map
A Field Guide for Science Writers
Field Notes from a Catastrophe
Additional readings

Class Time: 11:05-12:20 Tuesday/Thursday
Class Location: Walker 116
Class Listserv: 3629-1
Class Website: http://www.hu.mtu.edu/~mabrady

Guest Instructors: Laura Hernandez, M.S. Civil Engineering student
Kevin Hodur, Ph.D. RTC student

Course Description

Science writing is a bridge between two communities: the scientific and the civic. Doing it well means knowing how to tell a good story and how to do the research that makes the story compelling. Doing it well also 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 or apply it practically.

Stories about technology, sustainability, advances against disease, a deeper appreciation of the natural world, and the latest nutrition studies fill our pages and airwaves. Yet these reports often lack perspective or a skillful approach to help us grasp their significance. HU 3629 is thus designed to broaden your understanding of science writing and to guide you as you work toward becoming science writers.

Two people have agreed to discuss their views on writing as it offers a bridge between their work and the general public. Their areas of specialty are: surgery and forestry & environmental science.
Two guest instructors, one in rhetoric and technical communication and the other in civil engineering, will join us. Kevin Hodur will focus on plastics and sustainable practices; Laura Hernandez on reporting technical information to a client.

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 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, rhetoric, and research
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 2008. We’ll also read an independent science writer, noted for her essays on climate change, as well as a distinguished writer in residence at New York University who recounts the mystery of a cholera outbreak in 19th century London.

Course Requirements

Readings
I expect you to read the texts assigned in the syllabus before the class meets and to be prepared to actively and thoughtfully discuss the topics for a given day. 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 four substantive pieces:

1. An essay about a contemporary issue of your choice;
2. Op-Ed (Hodur);
3. A grant proposal;
4. A report of technical information to a client (Hernandez).

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

Document format
The default position for final drafts of pieces written in this class is a professional font, appropriate for science writing; single spaced lines in paragraphs; double spaced breaks between paragraphs; all left-justified.

Email attention
Please check your email regularly and email me whenever you have a question. I stay in touch with people in my classes through class listservs (ours is 3629-1) and individual email messages. I send out, for instance, additional remarks on discussions we’ve had, clarification about reading and due dates, and my comments about your working drafts.

Late work
I don’t accept late work unless you discuss your reasons with me well before it’s due.

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—including work that you have done previously—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 using 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 skill.

Attendance
I expect you to attend every class meeting, ready to participate fully and thoughtfully. If you miss more than four of our classes—two weeks—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—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—good • B work is effective and would succeed in most professional communication circumstances. It may lack the polish or effectiveness of an A.

C—adequate. • 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>Grade</th>
<th>A—Excellent</th>
<th>B—Good</th>
<th>C—Adequate</th>
<th>D—Poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meets assignment</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Most aspects</td>
<td>Significant gaps</td>
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<tr>
<td>Argument</td>
<td>Interestingly and 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 and sufficient support</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 and creative</td>
<td>Demonstrates thought</td>
<td>Conventional or generic</td>
<td>Superficial or incomplete</td>
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| Organization |             |        |            |        |
|Logical ordering | Establishes and follows a pattern | Follows a pattern | Generally follows a pattern; some gaps | Unapparent pattern or hard to follow |
|Paragraphs | Coherent and unified | Usually coherent and unified | Some not coherent or unified | Incoherent or lacking unity |
|Transitions | Provided as needed | Provided as needed | Sometimes missing | Enough missing to cause confusion |

| Style |             |        |            |        |
|Sentences | Correct and varied, according to meaning | Correct, with some variety | Correct, but elementary | Surface errors, such as comma splices or fragments |
|Diction | Precise, correct, creative | Correct | Some debatable word choices | Frequent misuse of words |
|Spelling | Correct | Correct | Very few mistakes | Misspellings confuse meaning |
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
I am a member of Safe Place. Its mission statement: “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.”