

Environmental Reporting

COMM 4670-3 • Spring 2011 • T 2-5 p.m. • LNCO 2840

“The common justification of the environmentalist’s technique of deliberate exaggeration is the claim that it is necessary to stir people up to get things done.”

—Gladwin Hill (1914-1992), *New York Times* environmental reporter

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Office hours: MW 3-4 p.m. and gladly by appointment.

Where’s my office? 2618 LNCO (at the end of the faculty office hallway).

Overview

Materials:

- ▶ Robert L. Wyss, *Covering the Environment: How Journalists Work the Green Beat* (Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2008). ISBN: 978-0-8058-5769-6 (paperback).
- ▶ Other readings as assigned (online).
- ▶ A USB drive to save your work to—at least 1 GB.

Prerequisites:

None, but reporting, writing, or environmental studies courses are helpful.

Course goals:

- ▶ To learn the basic skills of environmental reporting, including where to find and how to use expert sources and scientific data.
- ▶ To consider how to report across different media platforms.
- ▶ To gain a functional familiarity with relevant terminology, science, information sources, and regulations—to help translate jargon for our audiences.
- ▶ To improve our understanding of the Western ecosystem, domestic vs. endangered species, land use and control, water, and demographic pressures.
- ▶ To critically examine the role of the news media in the public’s perception and understanding of environmental matters, both nationally and in the West.

Why take this course?

- ▶ If you care about the environment and want to inform people about it.
- ▶ If you enjoy exploring, researching, reporting, interviewing, and writing.
- ▶ If you want to build a collaborative learning environment in which we’ll help one another find information, improve our writing, and transmit it to the public.

Reasons not to take this course:

- ▶ If you want to be given assignments, not generate your own; if you want to do all the work in class, not in the field; if you lack a passionate interest in the environment or informing the public.
- ▶ If you can’t commit to being here every week, ready to share and learn.

Our Social Contract

- ▶ **Be on time every day**, as you would for a job.
- ▶ **No eating and drinking** in the lab—finish lunch in the hallway, then come in.
- ▶ **Cell phones:** On silent.

Academic honesty:

As a student, you accept a commitment to the Student Code and the academic integrity that it promotes. As your professor, I'm responsible for enforcing it. Dishonesty includes cheating, plagiarism or any false means of earning a grade. If I suspect academic dishonesty, I have a responsibility to inform you and give you an opportunity to respond. If I still have reason to believe an infraction took place, I'll take appropriate action as defined by the Student Code, and you'll have a right to appeal that action.

Read the Student Code at: <http://www.regulations.utah.edu/academics/6-400.html>

Accommodation:

▶ **ADA:** The University of Utah seeks to provide equal access to its programs, services, and activities for people with disabilities. If you need such accommodation in this class, please provide reasonable prior notice to the Center for Disability Services, 162 Olpin Union Building, 581-5020 (V/TDD), or online at <http://www.sa.utah.edu/ds/>.

▶ **Content:** This course might expose you to things you find discomforting. *I will not make accommodations in course content, requirements, or expectations.* The policy is at: www.admin.utah.edu/facdev/index.html

Attendance:

▶ University policy online: <http://www.sa.utah.edu/regist/handbook/attend.htm>
Note this policy: "If you miss the first 2 class meetings ... you may be required to withdraw from the course."

▶ You must attend all classes. You get **zero** "free days."

If you don't show up, this class won't work.

- Absences **will** lower your course grade. You get points for being here. You don't when you're not. If you choose to miss class, you choose to lower your grade.

- *Numerous unexcused absences will result in a course grade of E.*

▶ If you miss class because of an emergency, please notify me *within 24 hours*.

▶ If you miss a day when an assignment is due and you have a legitimate excuse, I will accept the late assignment *at my discretion*. I define what constitutes a legitimate excuse, and I reserve the right not to grant full credit—or any.

▶ **Bottom line:** Unexpected things happen. Don't panic, but do let me know.

Assignments:

- ▶ Unless I say otherwise, all assignments must be on paper—**not** via e-mail.
- ▶ You must turn in assignments **on time** in order to get credit.

Grades

University guidelines:

<http://www.sa.utah.edu/regist/handbook/grading.htm>

- The main emphasis of this course is to report, write (and, if you choose, produce) a work of nonfiction environmental journalism. I call it a story, but it can take many forms. It can be a print article, audio story, video, online presentation, or other form we agree on.
- All these forms include reporting and writing. Below are criteria to guide you.

My guidelines:

A: Your story is thoroughly researched and reported. Your writing is accurate, highly detailed, clear, and compelling. The story has an appropriate tone and flows flawlessly. There are no or almost no mechanical errors (grammar, syntax, or spelling).

B: Your story is well researched and reported. Your writing is accurate, somewhat detailed, clear, and interesting. The story has an appropriate tone and flows well. There are a few mechanical errors, but they are not distracting.

C: Your story is not well researched or reported. Your writing is mostly accurate and clear. There are noticeable mechanical errors, but they do not greatly distract from the story. One or two elements are badly done or missing.

D: Your writing is inaccurate or unclear. Numerous errors exist, and they're distracting. Several elements of the assignment are badly done or missing.

E: Your writing is inaccurate, unbalanced and unclear. You miss the point of the assignment, or you don't complete the assignment.

Grading scale:

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| 100-94 A | 79-77 C+ | 69-67 D+ |
| 93-90 A- | 76-74 C | 66-64 D |
| 89-87 B+ | 73-70 C- | 63-60 D- |
| 86-84 B | | 59- 0 E |
| 83-80 B- | | |

Where your course grade comes from:

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| Attendance <i>and participation</i> : | 10 percent |
| Reading presentation | 10 percent |
| News story analysis (from any news medium) | 10 percent |
| Topic memo/story pitch: | 10 percent |
| Story—1st draft: | 10 percent |
| Story—2nd draft: | 20 percent |
| Story—final version: | 30 percent |
| Total: | 100 percent |

Finally . . .

Learning is an interactive, continuous process. To make it easier, I've set out some policies. Please make sure you understand them. If you have questions, ask anytime. To quote University of North Carolina professor Deb Aikat:

“You are not an interruption of my work—you are the purpose of it.”

Week by Week Guide

Note: Life's unpredictable, so this *will* change. When it does, I'll tell you.

- ▶ Read each assignment *by* the day listed.
- ▶ Wyss = *Covering the Environment*.
Other readings are online (Readings folder in Blackboard/WebCT).

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| <i>Week 1</i> | Tuesday, Jan. 11 | Intro: Syllabus, schedule, expectations, survey sheets. <u>Discussion:</u> Your interests and goals for the course. |
| <i>Week 2</i> | Tuesday, Jan. 18 | What is environmental reporting? <u>Read:</u> Wyss, Ch. 1; This_is_an_article (online). <u>Bring to class:</u> An environmental story—good or bad—to share with everyone. Prepare an informal 5-minute presentation on (1) why you chose the story and (2) one thing you learned from it. <u>In class:</u> Sign up to lead discussion on a reading. |
| <i>Week 3</i> | Tuesday, Jan. 25 | Challenges of environmental reporting; Western issues. <u>Read:</u> Green Ink/pp. 20-39 (online); Matching_the_Scene_Ch_2 (online). <u>Bring to class:</u> A <i>preliminary</i> idea for a story. Prepare an informal 5-minute presentation on it. |
| <i>Week 4</i> | Tuesday, Feb. 1 | Science and risk. <u>Read:</u> Wyss, Chs. 3 and 4; Reporter's Handbook (“The Language of Risk”) (online). <u>Assignment:</u> Analysis of a news story—ideally about your topic (due Feb. 15). |
| <i>Week 5</i> | Tuesday, Feb. 8 | Research: Digging for facts—and persistent Wiki perils. <u>Read:</u> Wyss, Ch. 8. <u>Bring to class:</u> One tool (book, database, website, etc.) that might help you report on your environmental story idea. |

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| <i>Week 6</i> | Tuesday, Feb. 15 | <p>Research: Interviewing.</p> <p><u>Read:</u> Wyss, Ch. 5; Interviewing Tips (online).</p> <p><u>Skim:</u> Wyss, Chs. 6-7.</p> <p><u>Bring to class:</u> The name of one source (scientist, regulator, advocate, etc.) whom you might interview for your environmental story idea.</p> <p><u>Due:</u> News story analysis.</p> |
| <i>Week 7</i> | Tuesday, Feb. 22 | <p>Writing: Short news stories and description.</p> <p><u>Read:</u> Wyss, Ch. 9; writing tool 23 “Place Gold Coins Along the Path”; writing tool 28/“Writing Cinematically”; writing tool 29/“Report for Scenes” (online).</p> <p><u>Discussion:</u> Troubleshooting your topic/story.</p> |
| <i>Week 8</i> | Tuesday, March 1 | <p>Writing: Longer news stories.</p> <p><u>Read:</u> Wyss, Ch. 10; writing tool 36/“Mission Statement” and writing tool 37/“Long Projects” (online).</p> <p><u>Prepare to discuss:</u> Prepare an informal 5-minute presentation on your topic memo/story pitch.</p> <p><u>Due:</u> Topic memo/story pitch.</p> |
| <i>Week 9</i> | Tuesday, March 8 | <p>Writing: Telling stories across different platforms.</p> <p><u>Read:</u> Environment and Press/Ch. 9, “Environment and Press” (online).</p> <p><u>Skim:</u> Wyss, Chs. 13-14.</p> |
| <i>Week 10</i> | Tuesday, March 15 | <p>Workshop time for story draft due at end of class.</p> <p><u>Due:</u> Your story—1st draft.</p> |
| <i>Week 11</i> | Tuesday, March 22 | NO CLASS—SPRING BREAK. |
| <i>Week 12</i> | Tuesday, March 29 | <p>Crafting a message to inform—and reach—an audience.</p> <p><u>Read:</u> Wyss, Ch. 15; Terry Tempest Williams, The Gulf Between Us (online).</p> <p><u>Discussion:</u> Troubleshooting your topic/story.</p> |
| <i>Week 13</i> | Tuesday, April 5 | <p>Workshop/discussion about your story drafts—how you’ll revise and expand them.</p> |

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| <i>Week 14</i> Tuesday, April 12 | Workshop time for story draft due at end of class. <u>Due:</u> Your story—2nd draft. |
| <i>Week 15</i> Tuesday, April 19 | Workshop/discussion about your story drafts—how you’ll revise and complete them. |
| <i>Week 16</i> Tuesday, April 26 | LAST DAY OF CLASS. <u>Due:</u> Final story, <i>including</i> cover letter for target publication/medium, by the end of class. |
| Finals week | Final stories available for pickup. |
