

Narrative Science Writing

English CNSR

Fall 2024

(revised 3/15/24)

Michael Pollan

Class session: Wednesday 3-5:45

Location: TBD

Office hours: Tuesdays 3-5, by appointment, Lamont Library 411

Class assistant: TBD

NOTE: The class guests listed may change.

The arc of this writing workshop will follow, step by step, the process of researching and writing a single long piece of science journalism: finding and pitching story ideas; reporting in depth and at length; outlining and structuring your story; choosing a narrative voice and strategy, crafting leads and “overtures,” and forging connections between your story and its larger contexts. As a group, we’ll also work as editors on one another’s ideas and pieces. And since reading good prose is the best way to learn to write it, we’ll be closely reading an exemplary piece of narrative science journalism each week. Students will be expected to complete a draft and a revision of a substantial piece of science journalism by the end of the term.

.

Books we will rely on:

Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style**

Elise Hancock, *Ideas into Words: Mastering the Craft of Science Writing**

Ed Wong, ed, *The Best American Science and Nature Writing, 2021**

Siri Carpenter, ed. *The Craft of Science Writing**

Blum, Deborah, ed. *A Field Guide for Science Writers**

Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*

*please purchase in hard copy. On order at Harvard Coop:

<https://tinyurl.com/F21-ENGL-CNSR-1>

Library handout for our class:

<https://guides.library.harvard.edu/pollan>

Resources on science news:

<https://www.eurekalert.org/>

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/>

<https://www.alphagalileo.org/en-gb/>
<https://europepmc.org/>

Harvard science news resources:

<http://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/>
<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/section/science-technology/>
<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/section/health-medicine/>

MIT:

<https://news.mit.edu/>

Expectations:

In addition to several brief assignments and exercises, each student will complete two drafts of a sustained piece of narrative science journalism of between 2,500 and 4,000 words. Students will also be expected to write a brief reading response to the weekly readings, to be included in their writing journal, which will be collected at various unpredictable times. Intermediate deadlines –for pitches, outlines and overtures-- are as important as final deadlines.

Students will be paired for editing purposes, and you will be evaluated on your editing as well as your writing and class participation. You will be expected to lead the workshop discussions of your writer's drafts.

All students will be expected to schedule at least one appointment with me during office hours *before* the middle of the term. This is the best way for me to support you in your work for the course.

No absences or late arrivals without prior permission, except in an emergency. No use of laptops, tablets or phones during class, unless the professor explicitly gives permission.

Deadlines and submissions: Missing a deadline is a serious infraction in journalism and so it will be in this class. All assignments should be submitted to me at Michael_pollan@fas.harvard.edu by 9am on the date specified, or to the list serve if indicated. All assignments should be in the form of Microsoft Word files and *should have your name –not mine! –in the file name.*

Attendance:

We only meet once a week, so it is imperative you come to every class, not only in body but in mind, i.e., prepared and ready to offer the group your full attention. Unavoidable absences need to be cleared with the instructor at least 24 hours in advance; you will be expected to get notes from a classmate and complete any missed assignments. Students

who don't complete an assignment will receive an incomplete. More than one excused absence will affect your grade; more than two may result in failing the class.

Grading: Evaluations will be based on the following formula:

50% Writing. The quality of your final article as well as intermediate assignments.
25% Editing. The quality of your editorial contribution to your colleague's articles.
25% Class participation and conduct. The quality of your engagement in class discussion, as well as any formal oral presentations.

Academic Dishonesty & Plagiarism:

The high academic standard at Harvard is reflected in each degree that is awarded. As a result, it is up to every student to maintain this high standard by ensuring that all academic work reflects his/her own ideas or properly attributes the ideas of others to the original sources.

These are some basic expectations of students with regards to academic integrity:

Any work submitted should be your own individual thoughts, and should not have been submitted for credit in another course unless you have prior written permission to re-use it in this course from this instructor.

All assignments must use "proper attribution," meaning that you have identified the original source of words or ideas that you reproduce or use in your assignment. This includes drafts and homework assignments!

If you are unclear about expectations, ask your instructor.

Use of Artificial Intelligence:

Handing in assignments written by anyone other than the author—you—is plagiarism; that goes for Chatbots as well as other humans. Using AI as a research tool is encouraged, however any facts produced by an AI must be checked by you. Finding creative ways to use AI in your work is fine, but must be disclosed to the reader.

Accommodations for students with disabilities: *“Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the [Accessible Education Office](#) (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term. Failure to do so may result in the Course Head's inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although Faculty are invited to contact AEO to discuss appropriate implementation.”*

Biography of instructor:

Michael Pollan is the author, most recently, of *This is Your Mind on Plants*. His previous book, *How to Change Your Mind*, was named one of the ten best books of 2018 by the *New York Times*. Pollan is also the author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, *Cooked*, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World*, *Food Rules*, *A Place of My Own*, and *Second Nature*. A longtime contributing writer to the *New York Times Magazine*, Pollan is the recipient of numerous journalistic awards, including the James Beard Award for best magazine series and the Reuters-I.U.C.N. 2000 Global Award for Environmental Journalism. His articles have been anthologized in *Best American Science Writing*, *Best American Essays* and the *Norton Book of Nature Writing*. In 2010 he was named to *Time Magazine's* annual list of the 100 most influential people in the world.

Pollan served for many years as executive editor of *Harper's Magazine*. Since 2003, he has been the Knight Professor of Science and Environmental Journalism at UC Berkeley and, since 2016, the Professor of the Practice of Non-Fiction at Harvard, as well as the Lewis K. Chan Arts Lecturer.

Schedule of Classes:

Class One — Introduction

September 4, 2024

Aims of the class; expectations and procedures.

How is science different from other journalistic beats? The authority problem. Scope of stories. Turning subjects into stories. Narrative v. information. Setting sights realistically —and locally. Class introductions. Ideas and pitches: the hunt begins. Start a story and reading-response file. Get-acquainted exercise: Peer profiles during class.

Class Two — The Reader Over Your Shoulder

September 11, 2024

Readings: "Politics and the English Language" by George Orwell
The Elements of Style by Strunk and White
Ideas into Words, Hancock Chapter 1: "A Matter of Attitude"

Deprogramming the academic writer. A fresh look at ledes, voice, structure, conceit. How to spot and kill off clichés, stale language and "journalese." Developing your literary superego.

Sign-up for article presentations. (Pick the week you will present a narrative science piece of your choice to the class, leading the discussion for fifteen minutes.)

Assignment for next class: Begin your search for a winning story idea, ideally based at Harvard or MIT or a neighboring institution.

Sign up: Student Article Presentation

Class Three — How to Read a Scientific Article

September 28, 2024

GUEST: Martin Samuels, PhD

Program Director, for Science, Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Brandeis

Readings: Samuels file of scientific articles (to be distributed)

Craft of Science Writing “How to Read a Scientific Paper”
(p. 232-238)

John Oliver segment on deceptive science:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Rnq1NpHdmw>

SAP (Student Article Presentation) #1: Schulz, Kathryn “The Really Big One” (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/07/20/the-really-big-one>)

Assignment for next class: Write a 750-word news account of a scientific article I will provide. You’re not expected to conduct any interviews, but look for interesting comments or, in an accompanying note, state whom you would interview and what quote(s) you would seek to get from that person. Submit to me by Monday, September 26, at 9am.

Class Four --- In Search of a Great Story

October 2, 2024

Readings: *Ideas into Words*, Hancock, chapter two

Blum, ed. *Field Guide*, Chapters 1 and 2

Carpenter, ed. *Craft of Science Writing* pp. 59-79

How writers read the newspaper, scan the web and lead their lives in search of story ideas.

What makes a good magazine story? Story ideas presented and discussed. How to interrogate a story idea: the catechism. Does it have narrative potential as well as news value? Conflict? Access?

Workshop scientific article news accounts.

Write a one-page query letter for each of two of your potential story ideas, due October 8, at 9am. Email to class list-serve.

MP assigns peer editing pairs.

SAP # 2

Class Five— The Art of the Pitch

October 9, 2024

Readings:

Student queries, to be circulated
Blum, *Field Guide*, Chapter 9
Carpenter, *Craft of Science Writing*, 80-107
Open Notebook pitch database: <https://www.theopennotebook.com/pitches/#>
Sample pitches from *New York Times Magazine* and *The New Yorker*
(Pollan on psychedelic science; Twilley on Refrigeration; Jon Mooallem on “More Reliable Apples”)

Discuss writer pitches.

Workshop our pitches; oral presentations of story ideas.

SAP #3

Class Six — Reporting the Long Story

October 16, 2024

Hancock, Chapter 3
Hayden, Chapter 4
Pollan research file, “The Trip Treatment”
“How to Conduct Difficult Interviews” in *Craft*
Nicola Twilley *New Yorker* pieces
Pitches for Twilley pieces

Gathering information (global and local); sources and resources; reading and reporting techniques; gaining access; organizing your story file (show psychedelic article files on laptop). Moral/emotional dilemmas of immersion reporting: reporter/source relationship. Ethics. Tips for interviewing.

Workshop our pitches.

Assignments: Reporting progress memos due to your editor and MP 9am October 22

Outline “Power Steer” for next class.

GUEST: Ilena Silverman, Deputy Editor, *New York Times Magazine*

SAP #4

Class Seven— The Outline: Structuring the Story

October 23, 2024

Readings:

Pollan, “Power Steer”

Hancock, Chapter 4

Hayden, Chapter 7

Twilley, Nicola “Africa’s Cold Rush” (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/08/22/africas-cold-rush-and-the-promise-of-refrigeration>)

Parts and wholes; moments and scenes. Discussion of structuring process of “The Trip Treatment” and “Power Steer.” The importance, and opportunities, of a narrative laundry line. *In Medias Res*: the inverted “e” structure and others improvements on chronology.

GUEST: Nicola Twilley, contributing writer, *The New Yorker*

Assignment: find and bring to class three impossible-to-put-down ledes.

SAP #5

Class Eight—Beginnings, Leads and Overtures

October 30, 2024

Readings:

Ledes of Pollan stories we’ve read

First chapter, *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson

“Good Beginnings” and “Nailing the Nut Graf” in *Craft*

Article lede and overture due to editor and professor 9am November 5; editors to write cover memos and bring to class November 6

SAP #6

Class Nine — Point of View and Voice

November 6, 2024

Readings:

Blum, Field Guide, Chapter 6
Mary Roach, “Almost Human” 234
(<http://niemanstoryboard.org/stories/annotation-tuesday-mary-roach-and-almost-human/>)
compare voice in “The Trip Treatment: (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/09/trip-treatment>)
with “The Trip Doctors”: (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/05/15/magazine/health-issue-my-adventures-with-hallucinogenic-drugs-medicine.html>)

Workshop ledes, overtures

SAP #7, 8

Complete first draft due to peer editor and professor by 9am November 12; editors prepare cover memos due in class

Class Ten — Filling Out Your Narrative Tool kit: Description, Transition, Anecdote, Humor

November 13, 2024

Readings:

Hancock, Chapter 5
Carson, *Silent Spring* (Ch. 2-3)
“Like Being There” in *The Craft of Science Writing*

Workshop ledes, overtures, drafts

Bring to next class an example of a memorable ending.

SAP #9, 10

Class Eleven – The Art of the Ending

November 20, 2024

Pollan endings, including “Trip Treatment,” “Power Steer,” “The Intelligent Plant”
“Good Endings” in *Craft*

Workshop selected drafts

NO CLASS NOVEMBER 27—THANKSGIVING BREAK

Class Twelve—Strategies of Revision and Editing

December 4, 2024

Robert Gottlieb interview (*Paris Review*)

Hancock, CH 6 “Refining Your Draft”

Kidder & Todd, “Being Edited and Editing” in *Good Prose*

George Saunders, “What writers really do when they write”

(<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/04/what-writers-really-do-when-they-write>)

How to sneak up on your own work to read it with the eye of an editor.

Workshop selected drafts

Discussion: The writer’s career

SAP #11, 12

FINAL DEADLINE: Final draft to me by Saturday, December 7 at midnight

Resources

Glossary of statistical terms:

<https://www.stat.berkeley.edu/~stark/SticiGui/Text/gloss.htm>

How to tell if a health study is any good:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/18/upshot/how-to-know-whether-to-believe-a-health-study.html>

www.vox.com/science-and-health/2018/7/13/17569730/savvy-science-reader

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/18/upshot/how-to-know-whether-to-believe-a-health-study.html>

John Oliver segment on deceptive science:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Rnq1NpHdmw>

Online resources:

<https://www.theopennotebook.com/>

www.sciencedaily.com/

<http://www.sciencemag.org/>

<http://www.nature.com/nature/index.html>

<http://www.newscientist.com>

Odile Harter
Research Librarian, Harvard College Library
Office: Widener Library, Room 220
oharter@fas.harvard.edu
Phone: 617-496-8028

Robyn Rosenberg
Engineering Librarian
Cabot Science Library, L207
[1 Oxford Street](#)
[Cambridge, MA 02138](#)
[\(617\) 496-5270](#)
robyn_rosenberg@harvard.edu
cabot.library.harvard.edu
ORCID: [0000-0002-4139-7628](#)

Major deadlines (Tuesday at 9am unless otherwise stated):

Queries	October 8
Reporting Memo	October 22
Overture (1 st section)	November 5
First Draft	November 12
Final Draft	December 6 (Friday)