Class details

The Beat (JOUR-UA 9201)

Fall 2012, time and date TBD

Location to be confirmed.

Instructor Details

Dan Vergano
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703/854-3791
703/366-9703

Office hours: TBD

Prerequisites

N/A

Class Description

This course will cover the fundamentals of writing feature science-focused articles for newspapers or magazines, although much of what will be taught applicable to other types of storytelling and to different media.

The class format will center on talks, discussion and in-class editing focused on how to craft a good story — how to come up with ideas, how to research and report the piece, how to source an article, and how to write well. We will analyze articles from magazines and newspapers and learn what makes them work or not. We will edit each other in-class and a series of in-class quizzes/assignments will test whether class concepts are understood. I will expect you to keep a notebook where you can show me notes made towards your assignments and beat.

Most of your grade will be determined by your performance on four major writing assignments. These four assignments will form the backbone of the class and will require effort, preparation and attention — you are meant to ‘learn by doing’ in these assignments, translating the class discussion into results. Get moving on them quickly; you should enjoy being immersed in the world or you won’t enjoy journalism.

The structure of this class and this syllabus draws directly from the 2009 course: THE BEAT: Science, Policy, and the Media V54.0201.01 led by Prof. Charles Seife.
**Desired Outcomes**

By the end of the course, you should have honed your journalistic ability to research and report deeply, imagine and develop fresh ideas, test them with the strength of your reporting and research, and finally present them in story form.

**Assessment Components**

The four major assignments will be:
1. Explanatory feature (900 words)
2. A feature about a news event (1200-1600 words)
3. A profile of an interesting (living) person in science, defined broadly (1600-1800 words)
4. An examination of a controversial and newsworthy science issue (1600-1800 words)

You will receive more details about each of these assignments in class, but they will all require solid reporting, writing, editing, and some rewriting or re-reporting. Do not leave assignments to the last minute — if you do, it will show. However, if you pick newsworthy subjects and write about them with a scope that's doable in the time allotted, you should be able to do admirable — and perhaps publishable — work.

Each one of these four assignments will count 20% towards your final grade, with the in-class assignments/quizzes and class participation making up the final 20%.

Failure to submit or fulfill any required course component results in failure of the class.

This will be a small class. Your writing will be edited very carefully and you will make progress as quickly as you incorporate these edits into your work. I will pay close attention to your writing, line-editing it with great care — so long as you meet your deadlines. Late work will be penalized (it can earn at most a 70) and will not be line-edited.

**Assessment Expectations**

**Grade A:** The student makes excellent use of empirical and theoretical material and offers well-structured arguments in his/her work. The student writes comprehensive essays / exam questions and his/her work shows strong evidence of critical thought and extensive reading. Written assignments are of publication-quality, demonstrating solid story structure, writing and reporting.

**Grade B:** The candidate shows a good understanding of the problem and has demonstrated the ability to formulate and execute a coherent research strategy. Written assignments demonstrate solid story structure and reporting skills.

**Grade C:** The work is acceptable and shows a basic grasp of the research problem. However, the work fails to organize findings coherently and is in need of improvement. Written assignments demonstrate a basic story structure, writing and reporting skills.

**Grade D:** The work passes because some relevant points are made. However, there may be a problem of poor definition, lack of critical awareness, poor research. Written assignments demonstrate some grasp of story and reporting, but show a need for major edits or improvement.

**Grade F:** The work shows that the research problem is not understood; there is little or no critical awareness and the research is clearly negligible. Written assignments fail to
demonstrate a grasp of story structure and reporting.

| Grade conversion | NYU Washington, DC uses the following scale of numerical equivalents to letter grades:
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<tr>
<td>100-94</td>
<td>A</td>
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<tr>
<td>93-90</td>
<td>A-</td>
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<tr>
<td>89-87</td>
<td>B+</td>
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<td>86-84</td>
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<td>83-80</td>
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<td>79-77</td>
<td>C+</td>
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<td>76-74</td>
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<td>69-67</td>
<td>D+</td>
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<tr>
<td>65-66</td>
<td>D</td>
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<td>below 65</td>
<td>F</td>
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NYU Washington, DC has a strict policy about course attendance. **No unexcused absences are permitted.** All medical-based absence requests MUST be presented by the student to the Program Manager for Student Life (Candice Clawson) before or during the class that is missed. Candice can help arrange doctor's appointments. In case of a longer-lasting illness, medical documentation must be provided. **All non-medical absence requests must be presented by the student to the Program Manager for Academic Affairs (Lauren Sinclair).** Non-medical requests should be made in advance of the intended absence.

Unexcused absences will be penalized by deducting 3% from the student’s final course mark. Unexcused absences from exams are not permitted and will result in failure of the exam. If you are granted an excused absence from examination (with authorization, as above), your instructor will decide how you will make up the assessment component, if at all (by make-up examination, extra coursework, or an increased weighting on an alternate assessment component, etc.).

NYU Washington, DC expects students to arrive to class promptly (both at the beginning and after any breaks), to be attentive, and to remain for the duration of the class. If full class attendance becomes a problem, it is the prerogative of each instructor to deduct from the final grade for late arrival and early departure. Being more than 10 minutes late counts as an unexcused absence.

Please note that for classes involving a field trip or other external visit, transportation difficulties are never grounds for an excused absence. It is the student’s responsibility to arrive at the announced meeting point in a punctual and timely fashion. Staff members may always be reached by cell phone for advice regarding public transportation.

**Late Submission of Work**

1. Written work due in class must be submitted during the class time to the professor.
2. Late work should be submitted **in person** to the instructor or to the Program Manager for Academic Affairs (Lauren Sinclair), who will write on the essay or other work the date and time of submission, in the presence of the student. Work cannot be left for Lauren under the door or on her desk, in her absence. If Lauren is not in her office, another member of the
administrative staff can accept the work and write the date and time of submission on the work, again only in the physical presence of the student.

(3) Work submitted within 5 weekdays after the submission time without an agreed extension receives a penalty of 10 points on the 100 point scale.

(4) Without an approved extension, written work submitted more than 5 weekdays following the session date fails and is given a zero.

(5) **Please note:** end of semester essays must be submitted on time.

(6) If for whatever reason you feel you cannot submit any written work in time, you should discuss this with Lauren.

(7) Students who are late for a written exam have no automatic right to take extra time or to write the exam on another day.

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**Students with Disabilities**

Accommodations are available for students with documented disabilities. Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212-998-4980 or see their website (http://www.nyu.edu/life/safety-health-andwellness/students-with-disabilities.html) for further information.

**Plagiarism Policy**

The presentation of another person’s words, ideas, judgment, images or data as though they were your own, whether intentionally or unintentionally, constitutes an act of plagiarism.

NYU Washington, DC takes plagiarism very seriously; penalties follow and may exceed those set out by your home school. All your written work must be submitted as a hard copy AND in electronic form to the instructor. Your instructor may ask you to sign a declaration of authorship form.

It is also an offense to submit work for assignments from two different courses that is substantially the same (be it oral presentations or written work). If there is an overlap of the subject of your assignment with one that you produced for another course (either in the current or any previous semester), you MUST inform your professor.

For guidelines on academic honesty, clarification of the definition of plagiarism, examples of procedures and sanctions, and resources to support proper citation, please see:

http://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/policies-and-guidelines/academic-integrity-for-students-at-nyu.html  
http://gls.nyu.edu/page/gls.academicintegrity  
http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity

**Required Text(s)**


You must read *The Washington Post* every day and the *Tuesday New York Times* science
section — and clip feature stories of interest. We will discuss these articles in class. Keep an eye on *The New Yorker*, *Slate* (particularly the *Explainer* offerings) and *IEEE Spectrum* as well. Online you should browse http://longreads.com/, http://thebrowser.com.sections/science-technology, and http://longform.org/category/science/ for features we may discuss. Read your email; I will be drawing your attention to certain features and will be sending you additional tip sheet materials and readings throughout the week. As well, you should read Nieman Storyboard (http://www.niemanstoryboard.org/), The Open Notebook (http://www.theopennotebook.com/), and Transom (http://transom.org/) for story-crafting tips.

**Supplemental Text(s) (not required for purchase)**

You also should purchase the following books (used is a-ok) if you do not already own them: Strunk, William and White, E.B. *Elements of Style*. ISBN-13: 978-0205309023

**Internet Research Guidelines**

Wikipedia is not an acceptable resource that you can cite in your reporting. Online government documents, studies and reports are acceptable sources for facts. Many/most magazine publishers will expect you to submit a checklist of active links to web addresses for such documents in publishable work. I will, too. So make a list of them.

**Additional Required Equipment**

If you are not on Twitter, open an account and “follow” @ScienceNow, @NatureNews, and @SciAm, if you don’t already, as well as anyone you see writing feature science stories you find interesting.

**Session 1**


**Session 2**


Deadline: Pitch for first story due by 9 am on day before class. This is the deadline for all assignments.

**Session 3**

Writing features off the news: News feature discussion, peer review of 1st story drafts, initial conversations about 2nd story. News feature writing with discussion of structure and conception

Deadline: Story 1 draft due by 9 am on day before class.
Read Chapter 6 of Blundell, if you haven’t read the whole book already.

**Session 4**

Feature Reporting Part 1: News feature discussion, peer review of 1st story rewrites, further discussion of 2nd story and writing feature off of news. Break. Interview early and often to sleep easy at night if you want to write features.

Deadline: Story 1 rewrite due by 9 am on day before class.

Read “Janet Malcolm, The Art of Nonfiction No. 4” ([http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6073/the-art-of-nonfiction-no-4-janet-malcolm](http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6073/the-art-of-nonfiction-no-4-janet-malcolm))

**Session 5**


Deadline: Story 2 pitch and plans due by 9 am on day before class.

Read Chapter 5 of Blundell, if you haven’t read the whole book already.

**Session 6**


Deadline: Story 2 draft due by 9 am on day before class.

Read Chap. 2 of Blundell for this class, if you haven’t read the whole book yet.


**Session 7**


Deadline: Story 3 pitch due by 9 am on day before class.

**Session 8**


Deadline: Story 3 progress report due by 9 am on day before class.

Assignment: Read “Should science writers specialize?”
a short forum post on the topic.

Session 9

Deadline: Story 3 lede, nut graf due by 9 am on day before class.

Read Chap. 5 of Blundell for this class, if you haven’t read the whole book yet.

Read “Arsenic microbe answers a long way off”

Session 10

Deadline: Story 3 draft due by 9 am on day before class.

Assignment: Find out how you can get a National Library of Medicine and Library of Congress library card, both of which give you on-site access to almost every journal imaginable.

Session 11
Feature Reporting Part 3: News feature discussion, continued story 4 work. Break. Discussion of audio, video and stills for added-value (and added fees) for feature reporting.

Deadline: Story 2 rewrite due by 9 am on day before class.

Session 12
Social media for feature reporting: News feature discussion. Break. Why are we using Facebook, Linked-In, Twitter etc. What good are they to you? Using social media for (some) fun and (maybe) profit.

Deadline: Story 4 pitch due by 9 am on day before class.

Session 13

Deadline: Story 3 rewrite due by 9 am on day before class.

Session 14


Deadline: Story 4 draft due by 9 am on day before class.


Session 15

Feature writing wrap-up: Peer review of story 4 rewrites, wrapup. Coping with the joy and anxiety of feature writing.

Deadline: Story 4 rewrite due.


Classroom Etiquette

All students are expected to participate in classroom discussions. All comments should be made in a forthright and courteous manner that focuses on the piece of writing or matter under examination in class. Disagreement is fine, and expected, but it should only be over the points under discussion. If you strongly like/dislike one of the stories we discuss, give your reasons.

Required Co-curricular Activities

If the class is small enough, and anyone wishes to go, I may arrange an optional tour of USA TODAY. It is worth seeing the building, if nothing else, to get a glimpse of corporate news.

Suggested Co-curricular Activities

Your Instructor

Dan Vergano is the senior science reporter and a columnist at USA Today, where he has been on staff since 1999. Previous reporting stints were at Medical Tribune and HealthWeek (PBS) with additional freelance work for Men’s Health, New Scientist, Science, Washington Post, Air & Space Smithsonian and elsewhere. Mr. Vergano has a B.S. in aerospace engineering from Penn State and a M.A. in Science, Technology and Public Policy from George Washington University. He won the 2011 Gene Stuart Award from the Society for American Archeology and the 2006 David Perlman Award for Excellence in Science Journalism from the American Geophysical Union, for a USA Today cover story on climate change. He was a 2007-08 Nieman Fellow at Harvard, where he focused on the intersection of science and politics.