

English 121-02 Writing about Medicine & Public Health

Instructor: Randi Hutter Epstein, MD, MPH

T/TR 1:00-2:15

Room:

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Office: TBD

Office Hours: Thursdays 2:30-3:30 & By Appointment



About the Course:

Medical and public health stories shape the way individuals view health and disease. The coverage can influence scientific research or health policy. This course will give students the chance to join this conversation by writing about medicine and public health for general audiences and also for scientists. To do this well, students must develop a keen sense of audience as they translate complicated science, explain its ramifications, and provide historical context. Students will write breaking news stories, blog posts, a researched feature article, and a personal essay. They will also have the chance to interview a patient from Yale-New Haven Hospital, a physician, and researchers.

In class, we will analyze essays, book chapters, and news stories for craft. Students will also explore visual media to hone observational skills, and we'll visit the Center for British Art for a workshop on observation developed for Yale medical students.

Learning Objectives:

- ✓ make distinctions between medical writing for professionals and for the general public.
- ✓ recognize the requirements of writing for general readers, including historical & scientific context
- ✓ adopt strategies gleaned from a close reading of exemplary essays
- ✓ develop skills to integrate material from disparate sources (scientific journals, mainstream media, interviews and observation) to create a unified research essay

Assignments and Contribution to Final Grade

- Short writing assignments (explainers, memos, fictional piece, observational piece) (10%)
- 2-page profile (10%) Two Drafts
- 2-3 page medical/public health breaking news story (10%) Two Drafts
- 2-page Profile II (10%) Two Drafts
- Class Participation, includes discussions, workshops, blog posts (25%)
- Grant Proposal for Final Paper (5%)
- OpEd for Final Paper (10%)
- Final 8-10 pg. Feature, including small assignments leading up to it (20%)

Paper Due Dates:

- ❖ 800-word Med Patient Profile D1 Sun 1/29 5PM Profile D2 Sun 2/5 5Pm
- ❖ AIDS SCREENPLAY D1Thurs 2/9 MIDNIGHT
- ❖ 600-800-wd News Story: D1 Sun 2/12 NOON D2 Sunday 2/21 5pm
- ❖ Memo for Scientist Wednesday 2/15 Midnight
- ❖ 800-1000 wd author profile D1 Sunday NOON 3/5 D2 Fri 3/9 Midnight
- ❖ Pitch for Final Paper: Wednesday 3/29 MIDNIGHT
- ❖ Midterm Self-Assessment Sunday April 3 Midnight
- ❖ Grant Proposal Final Paper Sunday April 16, 5Pm
- ❖ Final Paper: D1 Friday 4/7 MIDNIGHT D2 April 21 MIDNIGHT D3 Sunday May 7 Midnight
- ❖ Oral Presentation on Humanities in Medicine Lecture?

A Note about Quizzes and Style Exercises: The quizzes are based on the homework style exercises. We will examine sentence structure the way a scientist examines cells with a microscope: noticing the inner texture that makes some benign and others malignant.

A Note about Grades:

About A's:

1. It is the policy of the English department that "the grade of A should be reserved for only those papers that the instructor would consider nominating for departmental writing prizes."
2. It is also English-department policy that "more than 50% of A/A- grades in any one section is excessive. Unless an instructor has reason to believe that a particular section is so exceptional when compared to others s/he has taught at Yale in the past that it merits a higher percentage of A/A- final grades, s/he should take 50% in that range as a rule of thumb."

Texts:

New and used copies of the following are available at Yale Bookstore and Online Sellers:

- Roy Peter Clark, *Writing Tools* (Little Brown, 2006)
- Margaret Edson, *Wit* (Faber & Faber, 1999)

Readings:

- Weekly Readings will be uploaded to Courses V2

Requirements

- One notebook for in-class writing
- Two one-on-one meetings with me (to discuss an assignment or questions you may have; to discuss the final paper topic)
- Participation: Writing is about thinking and talking. Therefore, participating in class discussions and blogging & commenting on the website is crucial for a successful writing seminar. Attendance at field trips and one film screening is mandatory, unless you have spoken with me prior to the event.

Deadlines

Deadlines for all assignments are firm. In cases of unexcused absence, late papers—this includes each draft—will be penalized 1/3 of a grade for each calendar day beyond the deadline.

Attendance:

Attendance is crucial for a writing seminar. You are allowed one guilt-free, penalty-free absence, no questions asked. Each additional absence will affect your final letter grade. If you are absent, you are still responsible for turning on time anything that is due. I reserve the right to treat lateness as an absence.

Rewriting

Revising is an important part of inquiry and writing in this course. Most papers will require 2 drafts, the final paper 3. The initial draft should be a paper that you consider nearly completely, with the assumption that you have already rewritten and revised. This draft is not graded but the final grade will take into account the work you put into the entire process. I will provide detailed comments with each draft. You are expected to write me a memo responding to my comments

before proceeding with the subsequent version. I encourage creativity. Take risks. You will be graded positively for the attempt. In addition to class workshops, you are encouraged to ask classmates for their thoughts or input, but please acknowledge their assistance in your paper.

Policies:

Formatting work

All writing should be typed in 12-point font, double-spaced and have 1 inch margins. Ensure that you do not have spaces in between paragraphs (on your formatting bar, hit "0" for space between paragraphs). Use the Header function to Number each page, with your last name and Assignment Title typed in before the page number. At the end of each paper, (1) give the word count, (2) three words defined in dictionary. Number each draft, so mine would be EpsteinProfile-D1 or EpsteinProfile-D2, or EpsteinProfile-Final.

Integrity:

We will read some wonderful pieces and learn from these writers. We will have assignments where we mimic their voice. This is what writers do. We learn from other writers. We don't steal. Plagiarism is taking someone else's work or ideas and passing it off as your own. That is academic dishonesty and will be treated according to the policies of Yale College.

Self-Assessment:

Twice this semester—at the middle of the course and at the end—you will provide a cover letter with your final draft or drafts. At mid semester, you will discuss your strengths and weaknesses. Or rather, what comes more easily to you (the interview process? Gathering information?) and what you feel you would like to focus on (structure? Tone?). During the final cover letter, you will explain your narrative arc of writing through the course and through the final paper.

Culmination:

The semester will culminate with a final paper that includes in depth research, reporting, and narrative writing. We will spend most of the second half of the course building to this final piece.

Schedule of Assignments

Syllabus is subject to change: I will send weekly email updates with Readings and Reminders.
"Read" means you should have read the articles or chapters closely before class.

UNIT ONE: The Impact of Medical Writing

Week 1:

T Jan 17: (Class 1) Introduction

In class: *The class will do some in-class reading & discussion of various kinds of medical writing. We will talk about the impact and ramifications of public health & medical writing. We will have time to review the syllabus, plan for our out-of-class activities, including one film & a visit to the pathology lab.*

Write: **200-word reflective medical theme.** This is a reflection of a film or a book or about your own or a relative's illness experience. Describe the scene, not analysis. Have fun with this. Do not spend more than 30 minutes. Write as if you are telling a friend, "you can't believe this just happened." **DUE WEDNESDAY MIDNIGHT**

TR Jan 19: (Class 2) The Murky Divide Between Medical Fiction & Non-Fiction

In this class we will discuss the tone of medical fiction vs. non-fiction—and the ethical issues of writing patient stories. Can non-practicing doctors write about issues that practicing doctors can't? Are your patients fodder for stories or exploited? When does fiction allow a writer to explore and extrapolate in ways that non-fiction can't? Or can non-fiction trump fiction. We will explore these ideas, based on a careful reading of the following texts.

Read:

- ❖ Anna Reisman, Should Doctors Write About Patients?
- ❖ Whither Thou Goest, From The Doctor Stories, by Richard Selzer
- ❖ "One Death Provides Life for Many", Denise Grady, New York Times, May 16, 2011
- ❖ "Making a Story Sticky," *Writing Science*, Joshua Schimel

In Class:

- ❖ Discuss reflective pieces

Assignment

- ❖ Workshop memo for Sopolsky's article. We will discuss in class what's to be expected when critically analyzing a piece to be workshopped

Due

- ❖ Memo to Sopolsky: SUNDAY JANUARY 22 5PM

Week Two

T Jan 24 (Class 3) Audience Part One: A Critique of Articles

The focus for the class today is audience, using a close read of Oliver Sacks as an example. As practice for closely analyzing and workshopping a medical piece, we will workshop Robert Sopolsky's "Dude, Where's my Frontal Lobe."

Read:

- ❖ Oliver Sacks, "The Disembodied Lady"
- ❖ Robert Sopolsky "Dude Where's My Frontal Lobe"
- ❖ Written Workshop Response To Sopolsky
- ❖ Roy Peter Clark, *Activate Your Verbs* (pages 19-22)

In Class: WORKSHOP 1

In class we will have mock workshop using Sopolsky's piece. We will also discuss blogging.

Tr Jan 26 (Class 4)

Part One: The Patient Profile: Listening, Finding the Quote, Asking the Right Questions

We will challenge ourselves to merge the humanity and the science into one small piece. In preparation to hear from and question Kenyatta Clark, a sickle cell patient, we will read the science of the illness as well as the medical and cultural history. After hearing from Ms. Clark, each student can decide the angle of their narrowly-focused story

GUEST: Kenyatta Clark: Patient

In Class: Two Quotes & Structure

Read:

- ❖ Selections on Sickle Cell Disease (scientific articles) in preparation to interview Kenyatta Clark.

Blog: Select Three Bloggers

Due: Profile Sunday 1/29 5PM

Week Three

T Jan 31: (Class 5) Part Two: The Patient Profile Explored, Word Choices, Structure, Focus

WORKSHOP

We will use this time to discuss issues with the profile, with the science, with the history of sickle cell. And during class time,

Ice Breaker Exercise: Getting Over Writer's Block

Read: Examples of Patient Profiles Past & Present

- ❖ What's Wrong with Summer Stiers, Robin Marantz Henig
 - <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/22/magazine/22Diseases-t.html?scp=1&sq=henig%20stiers&st=cse>
- ❖ Racing With Sam, Robin Marantz Henig
 - <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/30/magazine/racing-with-sam.html>
- ❖ Facing Life with a Lethal Gene, Amy Harmon

In Class

- ❖ Writing Exercise: Physician Memo on sickle cell and patient

TR Feb 2: (Class 6) Audience Part Two

In Audience Part I, we examined the issue of audience in general as an over-all style; in audience part II, we will examine audience in terms of specific word choices.

Read:

- ❖ Opinionator NYTimes: Why I Donated My Stool
- ❖ The Teeming Metropolis of You
- ❖ NIH attachment of description of Microbiome
- ❖ Guardian: need to know for Critical Journalism
- ❖ Sacks Satire from *New Yorker*

In Class: The Interview Techniques

Due: Sunday Feb 5, 5pm Profile D2

Week Four

T Feb 7 (Class 7) Medical History: AIDS

GERALD FRIEDLAND VISIT

- Interview: Gerald Friedland
Write: Set Fictional scene and then dialogue, due Friday
Read:
- ❖ Newsweek Piece about Friedland
 - ❖ Gerald Friedland authored pieces
 - ❖ Selection from *And the Band Played On*

Due: Wed Feb 8 Midnight AIDS-RELATED SCENE

Th Feb 9: (Class 8) Style

In this class we will take a microscope to style and examine the same topic tackled by a variety of authors. What words are emblematic of their style? What sorts of grammar illustrate their voice—and how does that influence the impact of the piece?

- Read:
- ❖ Weschler, *Health & Behavior* (in Norton Reader)
 - ❖ Weschler, *Too Many Colleges Still in Denial* (Norton Reader)
 - ❖ Jack Hitt, *The Battle of the Binge* (Norton Reader)
 - ❖ Kenneth Bruffee, *Binge Drinking as a Substitute*
 - ❖ RPC: Roy Peter Clark, *Be Passive Aggressive, Use and Abuse of Adverbs*

Due: Sunday Feb 12th NOON 800-1000 word Hard News Piece (see assignment below)

UNIT TWO Hard News

Week Five: The Quick Turn-Around Science Article

T Feb 14: (Class 9) Hard News Part One

WORKSHOP 2

In Class

- ❖ Ledes & Structure
- ❖ Ledes with examples
 - Anecdotal Lede
 - Quote Lede
 - Setting Scene Lede
 - Question Lede
 - Contrast Lede

Read:

- ❖ PLOS piece on Timing and Intensity of Light Correlate with Body Weight
 - o <http://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2013/may/16/need-for-critical-science-journalism>

Bring

- ❖ 600-800 word news story based on scientific article: Lede & Structure

Write:

- ❖ Memo for Scientist, as if you are the lead scientist informing a colleague

Due: WEDNESDAY Feb 15 Memo Due MIDNIGHT

TR Feb 16 (Class 10) Hard News: Part Two

In Class: The Nut Graf

Read:

- ❖ Eli Lilly's Experimental Alzheimer's Drug Fails in Large Trial, NYT Pam Belluck, Nov 23, 2016
 - http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/23/health/eli-lillys-experimental-alzheimers-drug-failed-in-large-trial.html?_r=0
- ❖ Eli Lilly's Alzheimer's Drug Fails in Late-Stage Trial, Dashing Hopes, Damian Garde, Nov 23, STAT
 - <https://www.statnews.com/2016/11/23/alzheimers-eli-lilly-drug-trial/>
- ❖ Eli Lilly's Alzheimer's Drug Fails Trial, Wall Street Journal, Peter Loftus
 - <http://www.wsj.com/articles/eli-lillys-alzheimers-drug-trial-fails-to-achieve-goals-1479902563>
- ❖ Climbing the Social Ladder Can Strengthen Your Immune System, Monkey Study Suggests, Science, Nov 24, 2015, Viviane Callier
 - <http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2016/11/climbing-social-ladder-can-strengthen-your-immune-system-monkey-study-suggests>
- ❖ The Problem with Lilly is the Problem with Pharma, WSJ. Charley Grant, Nov 23, 2016
 - <http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-problem-with-lilly-is-the-problem-with-pharma-1479918700>
- ❖ Failure of Another Alzheimer's Drug Forces a Reassessment, WSJ, Nov 23, 2015, Daniela Hernandez
 - <http://www.wsj.com/articles/eli-lillys-setback-highlights-challenges-of-alzheimers-treatment-1479932924>
 -

Write: Rewrite News Piece including One Sentence in the Style of Sacks, Sopolsky, or Selzer

Due: D2 News Piece Sunday 5PM Feb 21

Week Six Medical Investigation
T Feb 21: (Class 11)

Read:

- ❖ Selection from Selections from *Selling the Fountain of Youth*
- ❖ Theranos Articles WSJ

In Class:

- ❖ Adverbs: When are they Really Necessary?
- ❖ Discuss Meeting for Final Paper

TR Feb 23: (Class 12) Medical Memoir

Read:

- ❖ Surviving Anxiety, Atlantic, Scott Stossel
 - http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/01/surviving_anxiety/355741/
- ❖ Selection from Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*
- ❖ Selection from Susan Gubar, *Memoir of a Debulked Woman, Surviving Ovarian Cancer*

In Class: Metaphor

UNIT TWO: Long Form Medical Writing: Finding Your Voice

Week Seven The Profile Part II

T Feb 28 (Class 13) The Profile of a Scientist/Doctor

In Class:

- ❖ Interview & Writing Exercise

Read:

- ❖ RPC, chapters 25 and 32:
- ❖ *Nature's Spoils,* by Burkhard Bilger, *New Yorker*, Nov. 22, 2010
- ❖ *The Measured Man* (Best American)
- ❖ "The Operator," by Michael Spector, *New Yorker*, Feb 4th, 2014
- ❖ On the Cutting Edge, Chapter Four in *The Hungry Gene*, Ellen Ruppel Shell

TH Mar 2: (class 14)

Guest Maia Szalavitz

Readings:

- ❖ Chapter from *Unbroken Brain*, By Maia Szalavitz
- ❖ Addiction Science Pieces

In Class:

- ❖ We will hear from Maia Szalavitz, on her memoir and view of drug addiction

Listen

- ❖ Choose One Quote

Due: Sunday March 5 NOON 800-1000 word profile

March 7 (Class 15)

Workshop 3 Profiles

March 9 (Class 16)

Read

- ❖ Wit, by Margaret Edson

In Class

- ❖ Wit activity

March 9 Midnight Draft 2 Szalavitz Piece

Mar 13-24: Spring Break, no classes

T Mar 28: (Class 17): Structure

Read:

- ❖ Roy Peter Clark: Chapter 32
- ❖ Michael Specter, *The Deadliest Virus (Best American)*
(We will discuss his outline)
- ❖ "Bariatric Surgery: The Solution To Obesity?" Rivka Galchen, *New Yorker*, September 26, 2106
- ❖ What Are We Going to Do with Dad, Winakur
- ❖ The Looming Threat of Factory-Farm SuperBugs, Melinda Wenner Moyer, *Sci Am* Dec 2016
- ❖ 10 Rules by Elmore Leonard

For Class

- ❖ Choose one of the readings. Note at least three places where the author "places a gold coin," as Clark would call it. You don't need to print out these stories, but email me your findings. Also, mark where the author is telling a story and where he is reporting. To do this, choose two colors of markers, or use a pencil and a pen. Run a line along the left margin, using one color for story and another for reporting.

Th Mar 30 (Class 18):

Use of First Person

Write:

Source List for your final piece /Pitch for final feature

In Class:

- ❖ What's in a Pitch

Read

- ❖ Selection from David Quammen, *Ebola*
- ❖ Elizabeth Kolbert, *Stung*, Dept of Entomology, *New Yorker*
- ❖ Selection from Mary Roach, *Gulp*

Lab Visits Tuesday April 4 or Wednesday April 5

Visit To Path Lab this week (times to be discussed)

(Assignment: Writing from notes from the lab, quickly right up a 500 word piece on your observations after your visit. This should take no more than 30 minutes. This piece is more like an anthropologist's field notes. Will not be rewritten but considered for detail and observations, and should be incorporated into final feature. I should be able to paint a picture from your notes.)

T April 4: (Class 19)

Linda Thursday **British Art Museum: Meet at BAC, 1080 Chapel near High** Linda Friedlander: Lee Gutkind,

Read:

- ❖ "Picking Up Details," in *You Can't Make This Stuff Up*
- ❖ Scudder: *Learning to See*

TR Apr 6 (Class 20): Mid Twentieth Century Medical Writing

In Class:

Zooming Out: Explanatory Paragraphs with Authority and Simplicity
Sharing Lede for Final Pieces

Read:

- ❖ John Barry Hand-Out (In "readings" JohnBarryFever.Docx)
- ❖ Rachel Carson, *Tides* (Norton Reader)
- ❖ Lewis Thomas, *Germes*
- ❖ Selection from Berton Rouché, *Curiosities of Medicine*

Bring:

- ❖ **Detailed Outline for Final Piece, includes Lede & Nut Graf**

T Apr 11 (Class 21)

4 WORKSHOP D1

Th Apr 13 (Class 23): How to Write a Grant Proposal

We will spend this class discussing issues with the final piece while reviewing long-form pieces, and writing grant proposals

Read:

- ❖ Grant Writing Examples: To Be Distributed

Consider:

- ❖ **For your Second Draft:** Think of this as your final draft so you can spend the last week just playing with words. As we mentioned in class: 1. Please rewrite one sentence (or add) one sentence in your piece in the style of "our" writers and tell me who you are mimicking, such as Sacks, Harmon, Specter. This can be better or worse for your paper. Have fun with it and you can delete it if you want from the final. put that sentence in bold 2. Please add or rewrite one sentence in the way that would make Roy Peter Clark or Anne Greene cringe. underline that sentence and tell me why 3. define 3 words, they can be basic words, maybe it will prompt you to think of another way to say the same thing. I expect that as our reading assignments are short, you are filling it up with reading for your own papers. Please let me know what scientific articles, books, etc, you are using, which will be included in a source list in your final paper.

Grant Proposal Due Sunday April 16th 5PM

T Apr 18 (Class 24) Long Form Examples

Read:

- ❖ Atul Gwande, *Big Med*, *New Yorker*, August, 13, 2012
 - <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/08/13/big-med>,
- ❖ Brendan Buhler, *The Teeming Metropolis of You*, *California Magazine* (in 2012 best science writing)

TR Apr 20 (Class 25):

Draft #2 (workshop)

T Apr 25 (Class 26):

Structure

Read:

- ❖ John McPhee *Structure* *New Yorker*, January 13, 2013
 - <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/01/14/structure>

- ❖ Selection from Siddhartha Mukherjee, Emperor of All Maladies
- ❖ Melinda Wenner Moyer, The Looming Threat of Factory-Farm Superbugs, Sci Am. Dec 2016

Th Apr 27:

In class: Wrap Up Papers Due
CELEBRATION