



Communicating Public Health in the Media

CLASS SESSIONS

Monday, June 19 and Tuesday, June 20, 2017

8:30AM- 12:30PM and 1:30PM - 5:30PM

One-hour lunch break in between sessions

Location: Hammer Health Sciences Building, Room LL107

Directions can be found here: <https://www.cuepisummer.org/contactpage>

INSTRUCTOR

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will provide early and mid-career scientists with a toolkit for engaging non-experts in public health discourse through coverage of their work in mainstream media outlets. As a pragmatic science focused on the health of populations, public health is of inherent relevance to consumers of mass media, and its accurate and engaging portrayal is crucial to informing public conversation about health policy. The course will provide a bridge between the distinct orientations of scientists (who want to know, “what’s next?”) and the public (which wants to know, “what does this science mean?”) by exploring the real-world impact of media coverage of public health on science and society; by examining how journalists and editors determine whether they will cover scientific findings and public health initiatives; and by highlighting typical communication glitches between scientists and non-experts and emphasizing techniques to avoid them in both verbal and written formats. The course will provide a survey of the mainstream media landscape, as well as convey the limitations of health and science coverage in these venues, emphasizing in lectures, discussions and workshops how participants can tap their strength as writers and speakers to bring their work to an interested public.

Understanding journalistic mechanics and priorities is an asset to any scientist who wishes to join the public discourse as a writer, speaker or sought-after expert.

All registrants should bring a laptop computer or other materials, such as pen and paper, to write with.

PREREQUISITES

No experience with communicating in mainstream media is assumed. Participants should come prepared with at least one idea they would like to develop for publication as a news story, feature story or commentary by a journalist or themselves. Students are expected to workshop their assignments with their instructor and classmates.

COURSE LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this course is to provide students with the tools to effectively communicate public health science to non-experts. To reach that objective, students will (1) learn the attributes of compelling mainstream media science coverage; (2) practice translating scientific jargon into layman's terms; (3) understand the use of social media for communication by composing sample Twitter and Facebook conversations; and (4) draft a pitch letter to an editor or detailed outline that will serve as the roadmap for their piece.

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Identify opportunities to bring a public health issue into the news landscape by zeroing in on the “scoop” in their science
- Understand the components of successful translation of science into meaningful and accurate layman's terms
- Dissect and map the anatomy of a mainstream health or science piece, and understand how it differs from a journal article, press release and informational content (such as that found on government websites like MedlinePlus)
- Draft a pitch letter to an editor or reporter
- Use social media to engage the public in scientific discourse

This course will not include:

- Media training (i.e. messaging) per se, though many of the techniques we discuss are critical to successful participation in contexts in which participants may be interviewed by journalists
- Instruction in techniques for television appearances

COURSE READINGS

There are no required readings but the following are highly recommended:

- Blum, D., Knudson, M., & Henig, R.M. (Eds.). (2006). *A Field Guide for Science Writers, 2nd ed.* New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hayden, T., Nijhus, M. (Eds.). (2013) *The Science Writers' Handbook.* Boston: Da Capo Press.
- Valenti, J.M. Improving the Scientist/Journalist Conversation. *Science and Engineering Ethics.* 2000, 4:3: 543-548.
- Van Eperen, L., Marincola, F.M., Strohm, J. Bridging the Divide Between Science and Journalism. *Journal of Translational Medicine.* 2010, 8:25.
- Zimmer, C. (2009) The Index of Banned Words (The Continually Updated Edition). *Discover Magazine: The Loom.* Retrieved from

<http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/loom/2009/11/30/the-index-of-banned-words-the-continually-updated-edition/>

- Zimmer, C. (2011) Death to Obfuscation! *Discover Magazine: The Loom*. Retrieved from <http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/loom/2011/01/12/death-to-obfuscation/>

COURSE STRUCTURE

Class meets from 8:30 AM – 12:30 PM and 1:30 PM – 5:30 PM on June 19 and 20 (16 hours total). We will typically begin each session with a structured lecture followed by hands-on applications of course material. Please expect some content spillover between sessions.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Day 1, Part 1 – Why communicate science to the public? What is journalism?

Learning Objectives: Understand the journalistic mission; shared values and missions of journalism, public health and science; how communicating in mainstream media can affect both policy and science. Understand the goals and attributes of journalistic communication versus publicity, informational pieces and scientific papers; how the narrative characteristics that appeal to editors and readers of mainstream media publications differ from those of scientists.

Recommended Reading: Van Eperen et al., Hayden & Nijhus chapter 2

Day 1, Part 2 – What makes news, and what does it look like?

Learning Objectives: Understand the anatomy of a news story, feature, commentary, press release and educational/informational literature; the use of anecdotes and quotes in journalistic media. Apply knowledge during in-class exercise. Understand the components of a successful story pitch; the relationship of the pitch to the writing process. Apply knowledge during in-class pitch-annotation exercise. Discuss participants' story ideas and begin to hone in on the "scoop" in their science.

Recommended Reading: Hayden & Nijhus chapter 3

Day 2, Part 1 – Communicating glitches; Translating science in layman's terms

Learning Objectives: Understand typical communication glitches between scientists, journalists, and the public; techniques to mitigate communication

breakdown; the distinction between jargon and layman's terms. Practice translating science using plain English. Understand the uses of social media in science communication; how to compose a tweet or Facebook post. Apply knowledge of plain language explanation of science to practice tweets.

Recommended Reading: Blum chapter 4; Hayden & Nijhus chapter 24; Zimmer pieces

Day 2, Part 2 – The Pitch

Learning Objectives: Understand how to cultivate relationships that will improve communication of science to the public. Explore mainstream media venues that cover public health. Draft personal story pitches or outlines; workshop pitches or outlines with fellow participants and discuss possible media outlets for placement.

Recommended Reading: Valenti; Hayden & Nijhus chapter 7