Practical Science Writing

(HPSC0151)

Course Syllabus

2024-25 session (T1) | Helen Pearson | helen.pearson@ucl.ac.uk

Course Information

This module supports students to develop essential and advanced science writing skills in order to communicate research to different audiences and through different channels. The module is taught by a practitioner and is heavily focused on practical exercises and journalistic skills that can be applied to a broad range of science writing.

It involves a combination of lectures, practical in-class exercises, discussion and critique, as well as independent work and development of submitted assignments, on which students will receive formative feedback from the tutor.

Basic course information

Course website:	See Moodle
Moodle Web site:	Search "HPSC0151"
Assessment:	Coursework
Timetable:	See portico
Prerequisites:	None
Required texts:	See reading list
Course tutor:	Helen Pearson
Contact:	helen.pearson@ucl.ac.uk
Web:	
Office location:	
Office hours:	Responding to emails 8-9am Wednesdays. No office at STS.

How is the course organised?

Teaching for this course takes the form of weekly two-hour sessions. A quarter to a third of each session is devoted to discussing theoretical and practical issues. In the remaining time, students complete practical tasks under the guidance of the course tutor. These will include producing and submitting content on which you will receive formative feedback.

The table below provides you with an *indicative* list of the weekly themes for the lecture material and for the practical activities. The course tutor reserves the right to change part of this list, or the order of topics, at short notice.

Each week specific items from the reading list may be suggested. These are indicative, for those willing to go deeper into one subject.

Synoptic Schedule

UCL Week	Lectures	Practicals	Readings
	Topic	Topic	
06	**Why write about science?** Making complex research clear, concise and accurate. Top tips for writing.	Getting over fear of the blank page by getting stuck in straight away. Write at least 2 paragraphs about a press release or paper, making it clear and accessible.	See list at end of document
07	**What shall I write about?** How to find a story; what makes a story newsworthy. Basics of news writing.	From a selection of press releases, decide which you would write about. What's interesting? What's newsworthy? Write at least 2-3 paragraphs of a science news story, including headline. Focus on getting the news at the top.	
08	**Interviewing: why, how and who** Goals of interviewing. Getting a balance of opinion and diversity of sources.	Prepare and take part in a mock press briefing. 'Journalists' will prepare and ask questions and 'experts' will prepare and give answers. Identify good quotes, and the key elements that will make up a story.	
09	**The importance of editing** Why edit, and what the process is like.	Practice sharpening up a sentence to make it clear. Edit a partner's story from last week, with explanatory comments and queries for the author. Discuss the edits and respond to them.	
10	**Going short: How to write headlines and social media posts** **+** **Fact checking** Learn to rigorously fact check your work.	Practice writing headlines or social posts for a story. Make a fact checking document for an article. Discuss if AI tools are accurate sources.	
11	**READING WEEK**		
12	**Going long: Writing a feature story or other long article.**	Reverse engineer a feature: work out who was interviewed & how the story was reported & structured.	

	What's involved in reporting & writing a feature.	Brainstorm provisional ideas for a feature story or profile of your own.	
13	**How to pitch: selling your story idea** Components of a pitch: what's new, why now, why this media outlet? What editors want to see.	Write a bullet point pitch for the feature story/long form article you want to write. Friendly Dragon's Den: Pitch your feature to the group in 2 minutes and get feedback.	
14	**Voice and style: making your writing engaging and original**	Analyse a longer form piece of writing: what sentences do you love/hate and why? Try descriptive 'free writing' about a picture.	
15	**Flavours of science writing: journalism, opinion, promotional writing & more**	What are the differences between journalism, opinion and press releases/PR? Guest speaker on one of these forms of writing. Practice writing a press release.	
16	**Going super-long: writing science books** How book-writing differs from other forms. Final questions about the course.	Try more personal/creative writing. Free write about a time that science/medicine/tech touched your own life.	

Readings:

Some specific additional reading may be provided in class each week.

News sources

Throughout the course you should regularly read, and critique, science news outlets such as:

BBC https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science_and_environment

New York Times https://www.nytimes.com/section/science

New Yorker for outstanding long-form science features https://www.newyorker.com/

Nature https://www.nature.com/news

Also: The Economist, New Scientist, Science and any other outlets from around the world.

Books

The Craft of Science Writing: Selections from The Open Notebook

https://www.amazon.co.uk/Craft-Science-Writing-Selections-Notebook/dp/1734028009/

The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2023 (or from another year)

https://www.amazon.co.uk/Best-American-Science-Nature-Writing/dp/B0BT3QNGSP

Online resources

The Open Notebook: a non-profit organization that provides excellent tools and resources to help science, environmental and health journalists learn and sharpen their skills.

https://www.theopennotebook.com/

The Open Notebook: Tip Sheet for Newcomers to Science Writing

https://www.theopennotebook.com/2021/04/13/a-getting-started-guide-for-newcomers-to-science-writing-2/

The Open Notebook: Getting Started in Science Journalism

https://www.theopennotebook.com/getting-started-in-science-journalism/

The Open Notebook Pitch Database

https://www.theopennotebook.com/pitch-database/

Association of British Science Writers: How to Become a Science Writer

https://www.absw.org.uk/pages/how-to-become-a-science-writer-an-absw-guide-

Practical Science Writing (HPSC0151) 2024-25

National Association of Science Writers

Assessments

Summary

	Description	Deadline	Word limit	Weight
CW	Portfolio of science writing made up of two articles.	Article 1: 4-Nov-2024 Article 2: 18-Dec-2024	Up to 2,500 words	Article 1 (40%) Article 2 (60%)

<u>Please Note</u>: All deadlines for submission are at 05:00 PM

Detail of assessments

Description, Assessment Brief:

Portfolio of science writing

Working on your own, you will produce a portfolio consisting of two original pieces of science writing of no more than 2,500 words in total, each aimed at a stated audience and media outlet and showcasing the best of your writing. The recommended combination is:

- One 500-word science news story for publication in a major science news outlet e.g. BBC or New York Times. (40% of your final mark.)
- One longer-form item of science writing (maximum 2000 words), such as a journalistic feature or opinion article, for publication in a media outlet of your choice. (60% of your final mark.)

Other combinations of articles for your portfolio may be possible, in consultation with the tutor.

- Each article must include at least one real interview conducted by phone or in person, and evidence that this interview took place e.g. a transcript or recording.
- Each item must state your chosen audience and media outlet (e.g. general audience of BBC website; science-interested public that reads *Scientific American*).
- For each item, you must submit a thorough fact check document with your work showing a reliable source for all factual statements.
- You are not expected to actually pitch or publish your work.

Assessment Criteria:

Your work will be assessed against the following criteria, with the top two given particular weight:

- **Clarity, ability to make complex concepts clear and interesting**
- **Appropriate structure e.g. for a news or feature article**
- Choice of interesting, original science subject and/or news value
- Original reporting, interviewing, research and writing; evidence of work to find original sources.
- Accuracy: evidence of thorough fact checking
- Headlines
- Accurate targeting for the chosen audience and media outlet
- Where appropriate, voice, language and style of writing

A more detailed set of instructions for the assessments will be supplied by the course tutor.

Use of AI tools such as ChatGPT

Following UCL's guidance on use of AI tools in assessment, the assessments in this course (HPSC0151) will fall under Category 2: AI tools can be used in an assistive role. This means students are permitted to use AI tools **only** for specific defined tasks, and not for others.

You are not allowed to use generative AI tools such as ChatGPT to:

- Write any part of a class writing exercise or homework exercise
- Write any part of an assessment article

If you do choose to use generative AI to assist your work (and this is entirely optional), you are allowed to use it to:

- Do background research on ideas or an area of science
- Check the grammar of a sentence you have written
- Search for advice on writing and how to structure writing

If you are unsure about whether a use of AI is legitimate, you should speak to your course tutor.

Further details of the situations in which use of generative AI is permitted or not permitted are provided in the document 'Details of Assessments – Practical Science Writing' which is on the course Moodle page.

Aims & objectives

Aims:

The aim of the module is to support students to develop advanced science writing skills, to communicate science clearly to different audiences using different styles, channels and formats.

Objectives:

By the end of the module, students will:

- Be confident that they can undertake any kind of writing assignment in relation to science communication;
- Possess an understanding of professional practices within science media and communication industries, and a grasp of fundamental skills in these industries;
- Be able to work across a variety of group and independent modes of study, and within these to demonstrate flexibility, creativity and the capacity for critical self-reflection and improvement.

Teaching team

Module Tutor	Helen Pearson helen.pearson@ucl.ac.uk Office hours: Responds to emails 8-9am Wednesdays during Term 1.
Graduate Teaching Assistant	N/A