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Spring 2-1-2022

### JRNL 575.01: Story Lab

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#### Recommended Citation

Pickett, Mallory and Gammon, Karharine S., "JRNL 575.01: Story Lab" (2022). *University of Montana Course Syllabi*. 12591.

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# Story Lab Syllabus

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JRNL 575 (CRN32790)

Spring semester 2022

Class meets: 5-7:50 p.m., Thursdays  
Instructors Kate Gammon + Mallory Pickett

Virtual

*Office Hours by appointment:* [kategammon@gmail.com](mailto:kategammon@gmail.com) and [mallorypickett@gmail.com](mailto:mallorypickett@gmail.com)

## *Learning Outcomes*

By the end of the semester, successful students will:

- Be comfortable applying journalistic skills to the stories of science.
- Have an enhanced ability to assess the news value of scientific claims.
- Know how to develop relationships as working journalists with scientists.
- Have a deeper understanding of the nature and processes of science.
- Understand the differences and similarities between the culture of science and the culture of journalism.
- Be familiar with the pragmatic as well as theoretical approaches scientists use to seek new knowledge, and what those approaches mean for journalists seeking access and accountability for reporting science-based news.
- Understand the business behind scientific research – how it is funded and how that affects the questions pursued and published by researchers and research journals.
- Have experience facilitating thoughtful peer discussion about the challenges of covering science for a general audience.
- Have experience leading community conversations about issues of interest to scientists and journalists alike.

## *Course Overview*

This course will allow students to explore the culture of science, forge relationships with scientists and practice, through application and repetition, applying journalistic skills to stories about science.

Students who successfully complete this course will be more confident in their ability to report and communicate journalistic stories about scientific research, findings and the people and systems that support scientific inquiry in the United States. You will be able to engage in a broad conversation about the relevance of science – and science journalism -- to civil society.

You will spend time with scientists and professional science journalists and reflect in practical ways on the values scientists and journalists share and the culture and traditions that can affect opportunities for storytelling about science.

You will practice the fundamental skills of journalism within constraints peculiar to the science beat. You will focus on translating and simplifying scientific communications for a general news audience; applying news values as you evaluate and interpret scientific studies; developing relationships with scientists; and critically evaluating science news as it appears in the general media. Special attention will be paid to ethical concerns raised in the practice of science and science journalism and the contemporary conversation about activism in journalism and in science.

Presented as a weekly, three-hour seminar, this course requires students to prepare for and vigorously participate in class each week.

### *Course Structure*

The lab: Exploring the culture of science

Scientists and journalists are both concerned with verifying facts, sharing information and developing lines of evidence that allow fresh understanding of the world. These quests inherent in each profession are creative undertakings; and scientists and journalists are guided by the rules and cultures of their respective discipline.

The tools and processes each profession uses in pursuit of facts – and new knowledge and understanding -- are quite different, as are the obstacles encountered or perceived along the way. In order to cover the search for scientific knowledge, journalists need to understand the culture of science and scientists – and how it mixes with the culture of journalism.

With that in mind, each student in this class will establish a working, professional relationship with a lab group doing scientific research on the University of Montana campus. Students will act as “participant observers” in the labs as they learn about the practical realities of how science happens – how the lab functions, the relationships of lab members and hierarchy of that community, how knowledge is created, how research is funded and how questions are asked, answers evaluated and findings shared.

The relationships established for this class between the lab group and the journalism students is special. Unlike many professional relationships you enter into as journalists, elements of mutual interest and prior restraint are explicitly built into these relationships for this class only. Journalism students should help lab members understand the culture of journalism and seek opportunities to help lab members improve the way they engage with journalists and the general public. Moreover, the Principal Investigator of each lab – or his or her designee -- must explicitly approve any stories you produce about the lab, work being done in the lab or members of the lab, prior to publication. This is spelled out in the Story Lab Partnership Agreement.

Ideally, learning how to operate in each other’s spheres is reciprocal. Just as journalism students have been welcomed into a lab, so, too, are members of the lab welcome to join the Tuesday evening classes to participate in any of the class discussions or lectures that might interest them. Journalism students should convey this invitation to their lab members as part of introducing themselves and the intent of this class and keep lab members apprised of opportunities to participate well in advance of their doing.

The craft: Telling stories about science

This class takes up where JRNL 570 -- Covering Environmental Science and Natural Resource Issues -- ended. The fundamentals established in that class will be applied specifically to the nuanced challenges of telling journalistic stories on the science beat.

This class will use examples of best practices, as well as pitfalls, to guide exercises that allow students to practice identifying, translating, simplifying, reporting and structuring scientific news stories for a general audience. Students will routinely apply news judgment to peer-reviewed publications, evaluating which studies are newsworthy -- accurate, timely, engaging, meaningful -- to a general audience.

Several assignments will ask students to draw directly from their lab team. For these assignments, students will apply the practical lessons of the lab experience -- the ability to forge relationships of trust and respect with scientists, the ability to understand the things scientists value about communicating their work. Part of the challenge is to work within the availability of the members of the lab. This will vary from lab to lab and may change in a virtual environment.

Journalism craft assignments for this class aim to help students sharpen their interviewing and note-taking skills and develop the ability to translate jargon, compress and simplify technical or scientific information and work on presenting stories about science in an active voice and engaging context. Each student will work to publish or broadcast at least one piece from this class. The goal, as always at the University of Montana School of Journalism's Master's Program in Environmental Science and Natural Resource Journalism, is to share your professional journalism work with a broader audience.

### *Assignment details*

#### Style

All stories should follow Associated Press style or, in the case of broadcast scripts, standard broadcast style including script format with actualities fully written out.

Each document submitted for this class should follow the format in naming the document: LastName\_Slug\_DateSubmitted, (eg. White-AvianBrief-01282015.)

Within the document, each story should contain: A tweet about your story, a headline, a byline, the brief or story. For briefs, after the brief, a complete citation (Chicago or MLA) and the link to one suggested additional article related to the subject of the brief (provide the URL and date accessed.) Nothing but the body of the story is counted toward any assigned word count.

#### Briefing journal articles

Due after Week 1 and after Week 2

15%

Summarize an article from a peer-reviewed scientific journal in 300-400 words. The summary should highlight the news value of the piece, cite its original publication, and identify key author

or authors. It should be engaging, written in an active voice and appropriate for a general reading audience.

Depending on the assignment, briefs or short breaking news of publication may be expanded to require one or more direct quotes, in which case they may run longer. We will grade one of the two week two briefs, chosen at random. Together these assignments will account for 15 percent of the grade.

Lab prompts\*,  
Due weekly\* via Moodle  
15%

Each week the class will receive a lab prompt to help focus class observation and inquiry in the lab group that week, and to guide conversation during lab check in at the start of class the following week. You are expected to write a very brief and focused summary of your lab prompt observations and submit that to Moodle each week. Because not all labs meet weekly, the requirement is to submit \*no fewer than eight lab prompt summaries this semester. Failure to submit eight lab prompts will result in a zero for one half of this grade segment.

### **Attendance and class participation**

10%

You are expected to attend this class. Period. See the attendance policy, below. You are expected to participate in class discussion. That is how you take ownership of your own learning.

### **Short profile and reportage**

Due: Feb.15, via Moodle

20%

The goal of these assignments is to create an engaging snapshot of a scientist and their scientific interests and inquiry. For the profile you will request some time (virtual or safely outdoors) with someone in your research group. Reportage is a short news story that makes substantial use of observed detail to convey a sense of place, mission and personality or personalities. The reportage assignment will focus on either a virtual or live community event. You will revise one of these assignments. 500-750 words each.

### **Photo Essay**

Due: March 8 via Moodle prior to class and for presentation in class.

15%

Capture 5 photos from your lab or lab members, and write 3-5 detailed sentence captions for each. The photos should tell a narrative that may connect to your final feature story, or not.

### **Story: Feature Story**

Due: In stages (See below)

25%

Scientific inquiry seeks to answer questions that have not been answered or that have not been answered completely, clearly or definitively. Often, scientists are trying to sort out competing theories or trying to determine the best way to measure something, collect data, analyze or

present findings. Whatever the circumstance, it's a rare day that there isn't tension or controversy about how things are done or what they mean.

This assignment asks you to tell the story of a point of controversy or tension that involves your lab – its inquiry or its people. It could be internal or it could be external – your lab debating within itself or your lab's science butting heads with another lab's science. Your assignment: Write a feature story that places the tension you identify at the heart of an engaging story that advances a general reading audience's understanding of what your lab does and why it matters. You could also write a longer profile of a character in the lab, with a narrative through-line of challenges or surprises they encounter on their scientific journey. 2,000-2,000 words (hard max at 3,000)

Pitch 3/31: in class. Present at one-page story pitch to your peers for immediate feedback  
Plan 4/07: in class. Prepare a one-page plan of attack that represent significant pre-reporting  
First draft 4/14: on Moodle. This represents 60% of the grade for this project.  
Final draft 04/28: on Moodle. This represents 40% of your grade on this project  
Polished query 5/05: Attached to the top of your final version. A query letter selling your story and yourself.

### Grades

Grades are based on your ability to meet the journalistic goals of accuracy, clarity, engagement and timeliness as well as your use of appropriate grammar and AP Style. See Other Matters, below, for additional factors that affect grades.

### Books

Readings will be assigned and made available online (through Moodle) during the course of the semester. The following books are also required.

“The Craft of Science Writing” edited by Siri Carpenter (2020)

“The Science Writers’ Handbook” edited by Thomas Hayden and Michelle Nijhuis (2013)

Also, I recommend a designated notebook or journal sufficient to contain your lab observation notes for the semester. Your lab prompt entries will likely draw on these notes.

### *Other matters*

#### Professionalism

Course attendance is required. Missing more than two classes will result in a full-grade reduction (B becomes C,) missing three or more classes without prior permission automatically results in a failing grade in this course. Participation in class discussions is critical; you will have a rubric for what active participation means for us.

#### Deadlines

Deadlines are critical. Assignments are due by the time class meets except where otherwise specified. All assignments must be handed in on time. Detailed feedback will not be given on

assignments submitted more than 24 hours late. Late assignments will drop by one grade stage per hour. (An A becomes an A- immediately if it is late. The A- becomes a B+ once it is 1 hour later, a B after two hours etc ... until the starting grade is a high F or 59 points.) Assignments that are not turned in at all earn a 0.

#### Academic Honesty

All students must practice academic honesty. Plagiarism or violating the prior review requirement of this course are viewed as academic misconduct for this course. Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or a disciplinary sanction by the University. All students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code, which is available online.

#### Same Work for Multiple Classes in J-School

You may not submit for this course any assignment that has previously or will be concurrently submitted for another class unless you receive prior approval from the professor of both courses. To do so without permission will result in an "F" for the assignment and could result in an "F" for the course.

#### Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

This course is accessible to and usable by otherwise qualified students with disabilities. To request reasonable program modifications, please consult with the instructor at the onset of the semester. Disability Services for Students will assist the instructor and student in the accommodation process. For more information, visit the Disability Services website.

-- This syllabus is subject to change --