

# Practical Science Writing

## (HPSC0151)

### Course Syllabus

2023-24 session (T1) | Helen Pearson | [helen.pearson@ucl.ac.uk](mailto: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:	<a href="mailto:helen.pearson@ucl.ac.uk">helen.pearson@ucl.ac.uk</a>
Web:	
Office location:	
<b>Office hours:</b>	Responding to emails 8-9am Wednesdays

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

12	<p><b>Going long: Writing a feature story or other long article.</b></p> <p>What's involved in reporting &amp; writing a feature.</p>	<p>Reverse engineer a feature story: work out who was interviewed &amp; how the story was reported &amp; structured.</p> <p>Brainstorm provisional ideas for a feature story or profile of your own.</p>	
13	<p><b>How to pitch: selling your story idea</b></p> <p>Components of a pitch: what's new, why now, why this media outlet? What editors want to see.</p>	<p>Write a bullet point pitch for the feature story/long form article you want to write.</p> <p>Friendly Dragon's Den: Pitch your feature to the group in 2 minutes and get feedback.</p>	
14	<p><b>Voice and style: making your writing engaging and original</b></p>	<p>Analyse a longer form piece of writing: what sentences do you love/hate and why?</p> <p>Try descriptive 'free writing' about a picture.</p>	
15	<p><b>Flavours of science writing: journalism, opinion, promotional writing &amp; more</b></p>	<p>Discuss a piece of journalism, opinion and PR on the same piece of news. Identify the key differences between them.</p> <p>Practice writing a press release.</p>	
16	<p><b>Going super-long: writing science books</b></p> <p>How book-writing differs from other forms.</p> <p>+ Final questions about the course.</p>	<p>Try more personal/creative writing.</p> <p>Free write about a time that science/medicine/tech touched your own life.</p>	

**Readings:**

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

**General**

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

BBC [https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science\\_and\\_environment](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 many more from around the world.

Science Writers' Handbook: Everything You Need to Know to Pitch, Publish, and Prosper in the Digital Age

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Science-Writers-Handbook-Everything-Publish/dp/0738216569>

The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2021 (or from another year)

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Best-American-Science-Nature-Writing/dp/0358400066>

The Craft of Science Writing: Selections from The Open Notebook

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

The Open Notebook Pitch Database

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

Getting Started in Science Journalism: collection of articles

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

### **ONLINE RESOURCES:**

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

<https://www.theopennotebook.com/>

Getting started in science journalism

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

Association of British Science Writers

<https://www.absw.org.uk/>

National Association of Science Writers

<https://www.nasw.org/writer-resources>

## Assessments

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### Summary

	Description	Deadline	Word limit	Weight
<b>CW</b>	Portfolio of science writing made up of two articles.	Article 1: 6-Nov-2023 Article 2: 20-Dec-2022	Up to 2,500 words	100%

**Please Note: 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. It 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.
- One longer-form item of science writing (maximum 2000 words), such as a feature or opinion article, for publication in a media outlet of your choice.

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

- Both items must state your chosen audience and media outlet (e.g. general audience of BBC website; science-interested public that reads *Scientific American*).
- You will be expected to 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:

- Choice of interesting, original science subject and/or news value
- Clarity, ability to make complex concepts clear and interesting
- Appropriate structure e.g. for a news or feature article
- 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.

## 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

<b>Module Tutor</b>	Helen Pearson  helen.pearson@ucl.ac.uk  <u>Office hours:</u> Responds to emails 8-9am Wednesdays during Term 1.
<b>Graduate Teaching Assistant</b>	Davy Tennison



## Reading list