

Writing 105SW: Science Writing for the Public

Prerequisites: Writing 2 or 2E or 2LK; upper-division standing.

Catalog Description: Focus on analyzing, practicing, and applying strategies for communicating scientific concepts, research projects, and findings with non-specialist audiences. Students will employ both traditional and new media forms of communicating scientific knowledge.

Course Description: This course focuses on analyzing, practicing, and developing strategies for communicating scientific concepts, research projects, and findings with non-specialist audiences. Whether addressing policy makers, advertisers, civic organizers, school-aged children, or any other member of the public, science writers must be able to convey what a scientific issue means and why it is significant. Moreover, writers must do so in media and genres that the public can access, become engaged with, and understand. This course is appropriate for students who specialize in the sciences and/or humanities and social science majors involved with science-oriented companies, government agencies, non-profit associations, etc. Students will practice both traditional (e.g., policies, op-ed pieces, position papers) and new media (e.g., social networking sites, blogs, podcasts) forms of communicating scientific knowledge. This course differs from other Writing courses (e.g., 109ST) through its extended focus on composing public texts.

Curricular Premises: Writing 105SW addresses the specific issues associated with communicating scientific knowledge – from multiple disciplines – using public discourse. That discourse takes multiple forms, and in today's world, familiarity with multimedia and social networking techniques is mandatory. The course also addresses the need for science communicators to convey materials in accessible ways yet also maintain scientific accuracy, and it raises questions about the ethical responsibilities of communicators who are beholden to both institutions and to the general public. This course, then, is akin to 105PD: Writing for Public Discourse and 105PS: Writing for Public Speaking. It also differs from the other science/technical writing courses (e.g., 109ST, 107T) through its advanced, extended focus on communicating about science with non-specialist audiences. While originally designed to support the Civic Engagement track of the Professional Writing Minor, the course has special relevance for students pursuing the new Science Communication track.

Course Requirements:

Texts: Readings for this course include sample policy statements, op-ed pieces, position papers, as well as theoretical texts. Students also engage blogs, podcasts, websites, and other new media genres used to transmit science-related material to the public.

Assignments: Students analyze and compose in genres potentially including policy statements, op-ed pieces, position papers, risk analyses, public advisories/recalls, social networking sites, blogs, podcasts, and information visuals. Students create at least one independent research project, in which they must ascertain accurate scientific information through research, and then communicate it effectively to non-specialist audiences. This project may require that students convey their researched topic in multiple genres.

Outcomes:

- draw upon rhetorical and new media theories to analyze and practice common traditional and new media genres
- examine case studies of how different scientific texts are produced for, circulated for, and taken up by/rejected by non-specialist audiences
- analyze sample documents to identify strengths and weaknesses of scientific claims and arguments, including areas of ignorance requiring further inquiry
- produce well-researched texts that present appropriate claims/arguments for non-specialist audiences
- create at least one independent research project ascertaining accurate scientific information through research, and then communicating it effectively to non-specialist audiences
- write a variety of documents in both traditional and new media genres
- recognize differences in citation practices among academic, professional, journalistic, and new media contexts
- cultivate high standards of professionalism and accuracy, and an awareness that communicating science accurately has profound civic and professional consequences
- recognize the ethical responsibilities that science writers have to both their organizations and the public at large