

# Stanford | Continuing Studies

**Course Title:** Science Writing for a General Audience: From Concept to Publication

**Course Code:** EGL 27 W

**Instructor:** Jason Silverstein

## Course Summary:

*We live in a society exquisitely dependent on science and technology, in which hardly anyone knows anything about science and technology. — Carl Sagan.*

The task before the science writer is a tall one: to tell the stories not only of incremental developments and dazzling discoveries, but also of science and society, all while keeping in mind an audience of ordinary humans with limited time and background knowledge. This course will teach you how to write about science for a general audience and will help you turn your idea into a publication. In the beginning, we will learn how to find stories (not topics), do legwork for interviews, and conduct background research on scientific studies. Next, we will turn to finding editors and crafting an effective pitch. Finally, we will focus on crafting the piece and finding creative solutions to the unique problems of science writing, including how to translate unbearable jargon into simple prose while embracing the uncertainty of science. Throughout, we will closely read works by Sagan, Oliver Sacks, Elizabeth Kolbert, Atul Gawande, Rebecca Solnit, and others. By the end of the course, students will have learned each step of writing and publishing about science, and will have written a pitch and workshopped an essay.

## Course Materials:

- There is no required book for this course. The readings for this course are popular science articles, including long form essays and op-eds/commentaries. They will be available for free on Canvas.

## Tentative Zoom Schedule:

Hour-long weekly Zoom sessions will be held on Tuesdays at 6pm PT/9pm ET. These sessions will be recorded and posted on Canvas.

## Grade Options and Requirements:

- No Grade Requested (NGR)
  - This is the default option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.

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- Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)
  - To earn credit, you must provide at least one paragraph of feedback for your assigned colleagues during weeks 3-6.
- Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)
  - Writing prompts are 50% and feedback to your colleagues is 50%.
  - Letter grades for each assignment will be completed (100)/not completed (0).

*\*Please Note: If you require proof that you completed a Continuing Studies course for any reason (for example, employer reimbursement), you must choose either the Letter Grade or Credit/No Credit option. Courses taken for NGR will not appear on official transcripts or grade reports.*

## Weekly Schedule:

Tuesday: Zoom meeting at 6:30pm PT; meeting will be posted on Canvas that night.

Friday: Responses to peer writing are due by the end of day (11:59pm PT). You will be divided into different small groups for each prompt, so that you can give and receive feedback from as many students as possible.

Sunday: Post your weekly writing prompt by the end of the day (11:59pm PT).

## Tentative Weekly Outline:

### Week One: Introduction to Popular Science Writing

Reading (pick two): Ed Yong, “How to Survive Being Swallowed by Another Animal,” *The Atlantic*; Megan Thielking, “Can precision medicine do for depression what it’s done for cancer? It won’t be easy,” *STAT*; Sarah Scoles, “Cosmology Is in Crisis over How to Measure the Universe,” *WIRED*; Aimee Swartz, “Insomnia That Kills,” *The Atlantic*

Writing Prompt: Introduction on discussion board.

### Week Two: Finding Stories

Reading (pick two): Dana Smith, “Neuroscientists Make a Case against Solitary Confinement,” *Scientific American*; Sarah Laskow, “The Sun Set Off 4,000 Sea Mines During the Vietnam War,” *Atlas Obscura*; Maggie Koerth-Baker, “Why Is Water Slippery?” *FiveThirtyEight*; Nicola Twilley, “Gravitational Waves Exist: The Inside Story of How Scientists Finally Found Them,” *The New Yorker*; Atul Gawande, “Why Doctors Hate Their Computers,” *The New Yorker*

Writing Prompt: Nutgraf for your story.

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### **Week Three: Getting It Right: Research and Interviews**

Reading (pick two): Julia Belluz, “The Making of Dr. Oz,” *VOX*; Lisa Held, “Psychic Mediums Are the New Wellness Coaches,” *The New York Times*; Nadia Drake, “Universe’s First Stars Detected? Get the Facts,” *National Geographic*; Jon Mooallem, “The Amateur Cloud Society That (Sort Of) Rattled the Scientific Community,” *The New York Times*

Writing Prompt: Literature review and interview list for your story. Feedback for this week will help generate essential and revealing questions.

### **Week Four: Finding Editors and Crafting the Pitch**

Reading: Pitches to be posted on Canvas.

Writing Prompt: Pitch for your story.

### **Week Five: Some Elements of Style**

Reading (pick two): Rebecca Griggs, “Whale Fall,” *Granta*; Evgeny Morozov, “The Naked and the TED,” *The New Republic*; Oliver Sacks, “Altered States,” *The New Yorker*; Elizabeth Kolbert, “The Siege of Miami,” *The New Yorker*

Writing Prompt: Story draft for feedback no more than 1000 words.

### **Week Six: Writing with Empathy**

Reading (pick two): Rebecca Solnit, “The Separating Sickness,” *Harper’s*; Jessica Wapner, “Austin, Indiana: The HIV Capital of Small-Town America,” *Mosaic*; Katy Butler, “What Broke My Father’s Heart,” *The New York Times*; Michelle Nijhuis, “Fear of Humans Is Making Animals Around the World Go Nocturnal,” *The Atlantic*

Writing Prompt: Story draft for feedback no more than 2000 words (or a second story of 1000 words).