

**JRMC 8350 (AKA 7355): Health and Medical Journalism**  
**Spring 2009**  
**Wednesdays 9:05 a.m. – 12:05 p.m.**  
**Grady College, Room 20533**  
**Syllabus Version 1.0**

Professor Patricia Thomas

Phone: 706-542-1210

Email: [pthomas@uga.edu](mailto:pthomas@uga.edu)

Office: Room 254, Grady College

Office hours: Monday 1-4, Wednesday 1:30-4, Thursday 1-4

Website: <http://www.grady.uga.edu/knighthealth/>

Administrator: Anetra Mapp, [amapp@uga.edu](mailto:amapp@uga.edu), 706-542-8506, Room 252

### **Introduction**

This semester, you will acquire and cultivate the conceptual and analytical skills needed to craft accurate, timely, interesting and credible stories for audiences large or small. By the end of the semester, you should know how to gather and evaluate health and medical information from peer-reviewed journals, scientific meetings, government and institutional sources, institutional and community sources, watchdog groups and academic experts. You will use these sources to create stories exploring connections between health and wealth in the communities you cover.

You will spend the semester operating a one-person news bureau for a county in northeast Georgia. That county's UGA Agricultural Extension Service office will be your home base when you're in the field, and host agents will help you learn your way around. Your home on the Web will be [www.deepsouthhealth.blogspot.com](http://www.deepsouthhealth.blogspot.com), which is set up with an editor's desk (for me) and bureaus for each of you. Multimedia kits and flip cameras will be available throughout the semester.

You will contribute regularly to [www.gradyjournal.com](http://www.gradyjournal.com) and you are encouraged to market your four required articles to print and online news organizations in the county you cover and elsewhere. Potential markets include *Red & Black*, *Athens Banner Herald*, *Athens Magazine*, *Flagpole*, *Athena*, *Athens Parent*, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and *Atlanta Magazine*. WUOG, WUGA and WNEG are some of the broadcast outlets you should consider.

In addition to field research, this class involves readings, discussions, lectures, and workshop sessions devoted to your reporting, writing and editing. I edit completed assignments in great detail, and am available to talk about works in progress during office hours or by appointment.

### **Requirements and grading**

Punctuality and attendance are required for all course-related activities. You are expected to complete all assignments on time, participate in discussions, and behave in a professional and collegial manner at all times. I promise to reciprocate and to share what I know, introduce you to scientists and journalists who can sharpen your thinking and broaden your horizons, and admit when I'm stumped.

You will complete, on deadline, the following:

- One news story triggered by a recent scientific report, with local angle (500-800 words)
- One locally reported feature article (1,000 – 1,500 words), produced in collaboration with photojournalism students. You and your partner(s) will use this material to create a 2-3 minute audio slideshow or video.
- One news story about research presented at the American College of Sports Medicine Fitness Summit in Atlanta (500-800 words)
- One opinion or first-person piece about health/medical issues in your county (500-800 words)

In addition, you are required to:

- Publish five briefs, news stories or features on [www.gradyjournal.com](http://www.gradyjournal.com) These may include stories written for this course but not published elsewhere.
- Maintain a weekly blog that serves as an online reporter's notebook. Your posts can incorporate text, pictures, videos, links to relevant stories, databases or other resources. These blogs will be aggregated at <http://deepsouthhealth.blogspot.com> We'll work together to drive traffic to the site.
- Visit and comment on blog posts written by fellow students and post three comments each week.

This course requires the following activities outside regular class meetings:

- Field reporting on your beat. Your business-related mileage will be reimbursed at the state rate by the KnightHealth Graduate Student Travel Fund, using the mileage reporting form posted on WebCT.
- Attend three of four Global Diseases: Voices from the Vanguard lectures scheduled for January 20, February 10, March 17 and April 14. All begin at 5 p.m. in the UGA Chapel.
- Spend one day in Atlanta (March 26 or 27) reporting on the American College of Sports Medicine's national Fitness Summit.
- Collaborate with one or more photojournalism students in Mark Johnson's JOUR5370: Documentary Photography class to prepare an audio slide-show or short video as part of the feature story package.

Your final grade will reflect performance on the following:

- Four writing assignments = 60%
- Five published contributions to [www.gradyjournal.com](http://www.gradyjournal.com) = 15%
- Fifteen posts on DeepSouthHealth blog = 15%
- Audio-slideshow collaboration = 10%

**Academic Honesty:** All academic work must meet the standards contained in “A Culture of Honesty.” Students are responsible for informing themselves about these standards before performing any academic work.” Full text may be found at <http://www.uga.edu/ovpi/honesty/acadhon.htm>

**Online Evaluation:** At the conclusion of the course, you are expected to evaluate this course online at [www.eval.franklin.uga.edu](http://www.eval.franklin.uga.edu)

## Reading materials

### Required text:

Victor Cohn and Lewis Cope, *News & Numbers: A guide to reporting statistical claims and controversies in health and other fields – Second Edition*. Blackwell Publishing, 2001.

**Additional readings** will be posted on WebCT, distributed in class or sent to you as URLs.

### Newspapers and magazines:

You are expected to keep up with health and medical news as a way of discovering how other reporters cover the beat. Excellent sources include Tuesday’s *Science Times* section in the *New York Times*, available at <http://health.nytimes.com> and Friday’s email digest of science stories distributed by the *Los Angeles Times* (contact [science@latimes.com](mailto:science@latimes.com) to sign up).

Bookmark [www.healthnewsreview.org](http://www.healthnewsreview.org) and <http://ksjtracker.mit.edu> and visit frequently. On the first, scientific experts rate the quality of articles in major publications; on the second, experienced journalists peer review one another’s work. If you want to understand why some stories are better than others, these sites can help.

It is also essential to read print and digital outlets where you will be pitching your stories: articles that have been accepted are a barometer of an editor’s interests.

### KnightHealth resources:

Current and back issues of selected peer-reviewed scientific journals and popular periodicals are available in the Drewry Room. Medical textbooks and other hardback references are shelved in Room 256. These will help you keep up with your beat, frame ideas, prepare for interviews, research stories and check facts.

## Tentative Course Schedule

(The syllabus is a general plan for the course; deviations announced to the class by the instructor may be necessary.)

### Class #1 – January 14

Introduction: Think globally, write locally.

Instructor and student expectations and logistics for the course.

Guest speaker (10:30-12:00): Eric McRae, Associate Director, Information Technology Outreach Services, Carl Vinson Institute of Government. Using online resources to ask and answer questions. Tips for creating a map of your beat incorporating census data, health statistics, healthcare resources, schools, power plants, water supplies, railroads, highways, and other information.

Poynter Institute “Mapping the News” resources are linked to DeepSouthHealth and the list is posted on WebCT

### Class #2 – January 21

Lecture: Interviewing like a reporter – asking the right questions, listening to what people say (and don’t say)

Discussion: Show off and discuss your map, report on exploration of your beat; pitches for first news story

Guest speaker: District Health Director Dr. Claude Burnett – How seven counties fit into the big picture of public health in Georgia

### Readings:

Cohn & Cope – Chapters 1-3

Gastel, B – photocopy of chapter 4, *Health Writer’s Handbook*

Zinsser, W – photocopy of chapter 12, *On Writing Well*

### Class #3 – January 28

Guest lecture (9:00 – 10:30) Mark Ebell, MD, professor and assistant to the Provost, MCG/UGA Medical Partnership – evidence-based medicine, pharma and conflict of interest issues

Discussion: Reading like a reporter (don’t believe everything you read in *Nature* or *New England Journal of Medicine*)

Cohn & Cope – Chapters 4-6

Ebell readings on WebCT

### Class #4 – February 4

**Assignment due: news story based on peer-reviewed journal**

9:00 – 10:30:

Meet with Mark Johnson and documentary photography students, discuss visual storytelling and collaboration on feature and audio slide show.

Brainstorm feature ideas, reporting strategies, target audience.

Guest lecture (10:30-12): Andy Miller, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* – Inside an award-winning investigative series about death and neglect in Georgia’s mental health system.

“A Hidden Shame: Danger and Death in Georgia’s Mental Health Hospitals,” available at [www.ajc.com](http://www.ajc.com) under “special projects.”

Class # 5 – February 11

Discussion: Where we stand with news stories, blogs, GradyJournal stories. Discuss edited versions of news stories, their strengths and weak spots.

Guest speaker (10:30 – 12): Dr. Daniel G. Colley, professor of microbiology and director, Center for Tropical and Emerging Global Diseases – What reporters need to know about covering infectious diseases

Colley readings on WebCT

Class #6 – February 18

Lecture: Poverty, race and health disparities

Selections from the documentary: “Unnatural Causes.”

Readings:

Cohn & Cope – Chapters 7 and 9

Readings: “Swamp Nurse” by Katherine Boo, *The New Yorker*

Readings: NYT “Life at the Top in America Isn’t Just Better, It’s Longer,” Janny Scott, *New York Times*;

Grady Online Tutorial on Covering Poverty and Health (if posted)

Class #7 – February 25

No classroom meeting. Field research at your bureaus.

Class #8 – March 4

**Assignment due: draft of long feature/ first edit for photographers**

**Field trip to USDA Food Safety Inspection Service Laboratory for Eastern**

Tour of microbiology, chemistry and pathology laboratories hosted by laboratory director Dr. Joseph Hill.

Readings: [www.fsis.usda.gov](http://www.fsis.usda.gov) news releases for previous 2-3 weeks and recent news coverage of food safety

“Who We Are and What We Do: Eastern Laboratory,” from *The Opus* (June 2007)

Discussion: interviewing, writing, fact-checking and selling stories.

OR

Genevieve Polk, CDC – What reporters need to know about covering exercise: how understanding the science can help you evaluate the workout of the week.

OR

Mary Ann Johnson, Professor of Food and Nutrition Science, UGA – What reporters need to know about covering diet and nutrition.

Reading: J. Hart, photocopy of “Mechanics,” chapter 11 from *A Writer’s Coach*

### **March 11 – SPRING BREAK**

Class #9 – March 18

**Assignment due: revised long feature**

Guest lecturer: Jenni Laidman, former science writer for *Toledo Blade*, online magazine editor, freelance, blogger – One writer’s sometimes ecstatic, sometimes heartbreaking love affair with science.

Discussion of covering scientific meetings, associations, interest groups.  
Preparation for covering ACSM Fitness Summit

Readings:

Gastel, B – photocopy of chapter 3 from *Health Writer’s Handbook*

Laidman readings on WebCT.

ACSM Program on WebCT

Class # 10 – March 25

**Assignment due: audio-slideshow due**

Guest lecture 9-10:30: Amy Alexander, Washington-based author and journalist, fellow at *The Nation* – Covering politics, race and mental health, and race in the newsroom.

Class ends at 10:30

**March 26 or March 27 – reporting trip to American College of Sports Medicine meeting at World Congress Center, Atlanta**

Readings on WebCT

Class #11 – April 1

Guest lecture/discussant: Ivan Oransky, Editor, *Scientific American Online* – Social media and the future of online journalism.

Discussion: Writing for the web, placing op-ed and opinion pieces, refining feature pitches

Readings on WebCT

Oransky articles and links to SciAm materials on WebCT

Class # 12 – April 8

**Assignment due: news story from ACSM**

Guest Lecture: Author and journalist Rebecca Skloot?

AND

**Field trip to USDA Food Safety Inspection Service Laboratory for Eastern**

Tour of microbiology, chemistry and pathology laboratories hosted by laboratory director Dr. Joseph Hill.

Readings: [www.fsis.usda.gov](http://www.fsis.usda.gov) news releases for previous 2-3 weeks and recent news coverage of food safety

“Who We Are and What We Do: Eastern Laboratory,” from *The Opus* (June 2007)

OR

Genevieve Polk, CDC – What reporters need to know about covering exercise: how understanding the science can help you evaluate the workout of the week.

Class # 13 – April 15

Guest Lecture (9:05-10:30): Author and journalist Rebecca Skoot?

Readings on WebCT

**April 16-19 Association of Health Care Journalists, Grand Hyatt Seattle**

Class # 14 – April 22

**Assignment due: op-ed or first-person piece**

Lecture: Covering the quality of Medical Care.

Readings:

Cohn & Cope – Chapters 8 and 10

Charles Ornstein lecture and links posted at

<http://www.grady.uga.edu:16080/KnightHealth/GNAT/Ornstein/index.html>

AND

Guest Lecture: Author and journalist Rebecca Skloot?

OR

Dr. Angela Fertig, UGA College of Public Health – An economist looks at the drug industry.

Readings on WebCT

Class #15 – April 29 (last class)

**Field trip to Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study**  
Wildlife Health Building, UGA

Dr John Fischer, Dr. Joe Corn, et al. – What reporters need to know about covering the dynamic relationship between wildlife, domestic animal and human health. AND: How scientists tell good reporters from bad ones.

Readings:

Ian Frazier, “Hogs Wild,” *The New Yorker*, Dec 12, 2005, on WebCT.  
Additional readings on WebCT