SYLLABUS
PSYCHOLOGY 4SC6: SCIENCE COMMUNICATION
Department of Psychology, Neuroscience, and Behaviour
McMaster University
2013-2014

Professor
Dr. J. M. Ostovich
Email: jmostovich@mcmaster.ca for all course-related email; do not use the Avenue system.
Phone: It is pointless to phone me.
Office: PC-415A
Office hours: By appointment.

Teaching Assistants
Paul Fraccaro: fraccap@mcmaster.ca
Nicole LeBarr: lebarran@mcmaster.ca

Classes
This course has been scheduled for Tuesdays 2:30-4:30 and Wednesdays 2:30-4:30 (Fall JHE 329; Winter BSB 117), and for a tutorial on Mondays at 11:30 (location TBA). We will not be meeting at all of those times! It is unlikely that Dr. O. will hold more than 2 hours of class per week; Paul and Nicole will use the rest of the time for tutorials and office hours. All time-use will be announced on the course website and in class as we go.

More About Your TAs
You will be assigned to either Paul or Nicole (they are equally fabulous) for the entire year. They will mentor you through the writing process, and will be your first port of call if you have questions or problems of any kind. Please see the course website under “content” for brief bios; you can contact the person whose interests most closely mirror your own if you’d like to be assigned to them (there is a limit, though, on how many students each can take, so act fast).

Course Description. This course has been designed to teach you the art of science communication. Psychology is one of many fields that suffer from inaccurate dissemination efforts: lay audiences are bombarded by headlines screaming out causal relationships that do not exist, and by error-filled reports that diminish our science in their eyes. This year, we will work on accurately reporting psychological science to a variety of audiences, beginning with newspaper audiences, moving on to Wikipedia-style audiences, and ending with Scientific American audiences. By the end of the year, you will have produced a portfolio containing accurate and (one hopes) exciting reports describing, in varying levels of sophistication, aspects of psychological science that interest you.

Textbooks and Readings. There is no assigned textbook for this course. However, we will post many required readings and links on our Avenue website, and/or distribute paper copies in class. It is important that you keep up with these readings: they will be used as a basis for your assignments, and/or as tools to help you do well on your assignments.

If you are not a good writer (odds are that you are not, since we no longer teach grammar or punctuation), then you should pick up something like Eats Shoots and Leaves by Lynn Truss (a fun punctuation primer), Elements of Style by Strunk & White (a less fun grammar and basic writing guide, used by everyone who writes anything), Making Sense in Psychology: A Student’s Guide to Research and Writing by Northey & Timney (more specific to psych than the other two books, but also more relevant to writing research articles than to science dissemination), or any other writing book you are drawn to. (I have several writing guides in my office that I’m happy to lend out if you’d like extra writing support.)
What We’ll Be Doing

Introduction to Science Communication. Our first several classes will involve a discussion of the pitfalls of the inaccurate dissemination of our science. We will also discuss a few writing tips, so that we can all start from the same place.

Module 1: Writing Brief News Reports. Your first task involves learning to write brief, accurate reports about short empirical articles. You will write these as though describing an exciting finding for a lay audience (readers of the Spec, for example, who read at the Grade 6 level and know little about psychology or science in general), in very few words (250-500 word max). We will practice writing these inaccurately, as well as accurately, to get a feel for the sorts of errors that come up in this type of news report, and how to avoid them. We may ask you to use the internet to find a brief science report, to read it and its original empirical article to check for accuracy, and to produce a correction if you note any inaccuracies. In essence, this module is about accurate reporting of facts to people who would have little to no interest in reading the original article, and who are therefore dependent on accurate dissemination of its content.

Module 2: Writing Longer News Articles. Your second task involves using the skills you learned in Module 1 to write a longer news report, based on 3-4 (related) empirical articles of your choosing. This time, you will be writing for a more advanced news audience (readers of the New York Times, for example, who read at a high school level, and have some exposure to psychology and/or science in general), and will therefore add some complexity to your article, e.g., by discussing contradictory findings, and/or by introducing some degree of interpretation for readers to chew on. This module is about “finding the story”: accurately reporting facts, but stringing them together to tell some story about our science.

Module 3: Writing for Wikipedia. Your third task involves writing, essentially, a literature review on some topic that interests you. We have not yet decided whether you will write your own Wiki-style entry, or whether you will find, edit, and add to an existing Wiki entry, or whether you’ll do some combination of the two (either way, you won’t be posting directly to Wikipedia at this time; however, we may create a PNB-Wiki to immortalize your work). We will discuss this task in more detail in class when the time comes. In short, though, this module is about finding and writing background information on some theory or idea for an interested lay audience, rather than focusing more narrowly on research findings.

Module 4: Writing for Scientific American. In Modules 1-3, you developed skills important to disseminating information to people who know little to nothing about our science, and who may not have any specialized education in psychology or science in general. Your final task in this course involves writing an advanced report for an “informed lay audience”; this audience is usually comprised of university graduates (and students) who seek out advanced information on topics that interest them, for the sake of learning something new and using their brains. A Sci-Am article represents the pinnacle of science communication: it contains accurate reporting (Module 1), it has a story (Module 2), it contains solid background information (Module 3), and it adds some combination of synthesis, analysis, application, assessment of importance to the field and/or the public, and discussion of future directions.

Deadlines will be set as we go; Modules 1 and 2 will definitely be due in Fall term, and Module 3 may begin in Fall term but be due in Winter term; Module 4 will be due by the end of Winter term. Exact deadlines will be announced in class, and also posted on Avenue. Even though these are being set as we go, missing a deadline, even by an hour, will cause you to receive a mark of zero on whatever assignment was due.
**Missed Work.** If you miss a deadline for some legitimate reason (e.g., bad illness, death of a family member), get in touch with your TA immediately; *do not wait more than 24 hours* to be in touch, or you will get a zero. You must also submit an MSAF or visit your Associate Dean’s office to document the reason for your missed deadline; if we deem your excuse to be acceptable, then we will give you an extra day or two to complete the assignment.

But your best bet is to *keep on top of the work*. Never do anything at the last minute, and you will be fine! (even with a cold or flu, and certainly with a headache, you should be able to get your work done if you plan your time appropriately; in the news media, a deadline is a deadline ... you miss the deadline, you lose your job! here, you miss a deadline, you get a zero!)

**Assessment Scheme.**

You will be assessed based mainly on your written work (your dissemination portfolio), but also on participation/attendance. We will be using a points scheme as follows (to be converted to a percentage for your final grade):

- Module 1: 20 points
- Module 2: 25 points
- Module 3: 30 points
- Module 4: 50 points
- Participation: 10 points

**NB:** Our tasks and assessment scheme are subject to change. You will be notified of any changes in class and on Avenue.

**Academic Integrity:** In a course with a lot of writing, you might be tempted to use others’ work and pass it off as your own. This is plagiarism, and you must *never engage* in it! Copying and pasting from websites, copying from articles, paraphrasing from these sources without citation, copying from a friend’s or even your own work from another class or project, and “working together” with a friend to produce work that was meant to be independent (as all work in this course is meant to be) are all examples of plagiarism. Sometimes, people do some of these things by accident: if they do, that’s still plagiarism! Do not even come close to plagiarising in this course! If you do, you will be prosecuted for academic dishonesty ... a very unpleasant process! (see academic integrity statement, below).

One way to avoid plagiarism is to take notes in your own words (not paraphrased – new sentences created by you), and to create outlines, reports, and articles without looking at the original source material (but instead at your notes, which are, again, in your own words). If you never use others’ words in any step of the process between reading and writing, then you will probably not plagiarize!

We will probably, as our projects become more complex, use turnitin.com for the submission of your work. This website lets you know if it thinks you have engaged in plagiarism, and hence gives you a chance to correct anything that made turnitin suspicious. It also lets us know whether it thinks you have engaged in plagiarism. The point of using turnitin is not to suggest that we believe you to be dishonest, but instead to make life less stressful for everyone. If we use turnitin, you will be required to submit a copy of your work to that service, as well as to your TA; if you do not do both, then you will receive a zero on that work. You will find turnitin at [www.turnitin.com](http://www.turnitin.com); for more information about turnitin, see [www.turnitin.com/static/privacy.html](http://www.turnitin.com/static/privacy.html).
McMaster University Academic Integrity Statement: You are expected to exhibit honesty and use ethical behavior in all aspects of the learning process. Academic credentials you earn are rooted in principles of honesty and academic integrity. Academic dishonesty is to knowingly act or fail to act in a way that results or could result in unearned academic credit or advantage. This behavior can result in serious consequences, e.g., a grade of zero (0) on an assignment, loss of course credit with a notation on the transcript ("grade F assigned for academic dishonesty"), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university. It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty. For information on the various types of academic dishonesty, please refer to the Academic Integrity Policy, at http://www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity.

Avenue to Learn: You are expected to check our course website regularly for announcements, updates, discussion board postings, class times, and other valuable information. It is your responsibility to keep up with the information provided on this site.

McMaster University requires that we include the following warning in our syllabi: Students should be aware that, when they access the electronic components of this course, private information such as first and last names, user names for the McMaster e-mail accounts, and program affiliation may become apparent to all other students in the same course. The available information is dependent on the technology used. Continuation in this course will be deemed consent to this disclosure. If you have any questions or concerns about such disclosure please discuss this with the course instructor.