

MCS 2026-2027 Syllabus

TITLE Popular Science writing in English

HOURS 15

TEACHER Dr Raluca David

SHORT BIO

Dr Raluca David has a DPhil in Cognitive Neuroscience and an MSt in Creative Writing from the University of Oxford. She has conducted policy research at Oxford’s Blavatnik School of Government and has taught at the University of Edinburgh. As a writer, Raluca has been shortlisted for the Queen Mary Wasafiri New Writing Prize, won an Andromeda Short Story Prize and has been published in The Mays, Oxford Review of Books, Nomadology Singapore and East of the Web. Raluca serves as Head of Global Content for Bluestocking Oxford where she edits articles on women in science and beyond, and is a Visiting Researcher at SISSA.

COURSE DESCRIPTION (ABSTRACT – max. 1,500 CHARACTERS)

The Popular Science Writing course in English will equip students with the skills to write creatively on scientific subjects, using tools such as narrative, character, and rhetoric devices. Students will understand the contexts and cultures of popular science writing in the English language and the Anglosphere, focusing on key popular science magazines, styles and prominent examples of contemporary books.

The syllabus will present a history of popular science writing in the Anglosphere, its roots in creative non-fiction and the implication for the styles that have emerged. The ‘why’ of popular science will be discussed: why would a science writer embrace creative techniques, how does a writer make a text attractive, and could entertainment aid scientific understanding? In particular, the benefits and pitfalls of using narrative, story and character within popular science writing will be discussed: how to find hooks for a storyline, how to build characters and write compelling dialogue, where the line between fiction and non-fiction is and how to maintain, throughout, the trust of the reader, both in terms of making explicit the line between fiction and non-fiction, and in terms of balancing a compelling story of science with the limits of knowledge in an ever-evolving, vast domain.

The students will gain transferable skills such as writing successful openings and endings, structuring a sentence and a paragraph and using rhetoric devices effectively. At the end of the course, the students will have gained an understanding of the outlets where to take their writing further, what it takes to build a writerly CV, and what their individual strengths and weaknesses as writers are.

LESSON PLAN

5 lessons of 3 hours, comprising each of a taught lecture, a close reading session and a writing workshop with writing prompts and feedback:

Lesson 1: Creative Popular Science writing: why, where and how

Lesson 2: Openings and how to stand out

Lesson 3: Sentence, Paragraph and Rhetoric in English

Lesson 4: Narrative, Character and Readers’ Trust

Lesson 5: Endings and Outlets

PLANNED PRACTICAL EXERCISES (in class)

Reading Exercise 1.1. Close reading of 1-2 creative popular science texts in English, class comments on observed features.

Workshop 1.2. Write creatively to communicate scientific facts about a scientific object of your choice (examples will be given in class). 15 minutes free writing followed by 4-5 students reading aloud and the class and teacher giving feedback.

Reading Exercise 2.1. Close reading of 3 openings, class comments.

Workshop 2.2. Write creatively an opening to your own popular science text (can be on subject of previous lesson). 15 minutes free writing followed by 4-5 students reading aloud and the class and teacher giving feedback.

Reading Exercise 3.1. Close reading of paragraphs and rhetoric examples, class comments.

Workshop 3.2. Write 2-3 paragraphs using rhetoric devices of your choice, maintaining a style appropriate to the envisioned readership. 15 minutes free writing followed by 4-5 students reading aloud and the class and teacher giving feedback.

Reading Exercise 4.1. Close reading of 3 texts in which the writer uses character and narrative to communicate scientific ideas, and discussion of how the reader’s trust is maintained.

Workshop Exercise 4.2. Write a whole scene centered on at least one character and following a narrative, paying attention to the need to preserve readers’ trust. 15 minutes free writing followed by 4-5 students reading aloud and the class and teacher giving feedback.

Reading Exercise 5.1. Close reading of 3 endings, class comments.

Workshop Exercise 5.2. Write a compelling ending to the text you have been working on (or another if your prefer), keeping in mind factors such as readers’ trust, completion of story and desired readership. 15 minutes free writing followed by 4-5 students reading aloud and the class and teacher giving feedback.

TEACHING TOOLS & MATERIALS

Texts to be read will be printed in advance and distributed to each student in class.

Power-point slides will be used to teach.

Students need to bring notebooks, pens and name tags.

BIBLIOGRAPHY (any edition fine)

Fry, Hannah, and Thomas Oléron Evans. *The Indisputable Existence of Santa Claus : The Mathematics of Christmas*. Black Swan, 2016.

Jahren, Hope. *Lab Girl*. New York: Vintage Books, 2016.

Husain, Masud. *Our Brains, Our Selves : What a Neurologist's Patients Taught Him about the Brain*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2026.

WEB RESOURCES

Mrs Kelly's Monster, by Jon Franklin: <http://jonfranklin.com/stories-2/mrs-kellys-monster/>

Jon Franklin and 'Mrs Kelly's Monster', line-by-line: <https://niemanstoryboard.org/2012/08/24/line-by-line-mrs-kellys-monster-how-jon-franklin-wrote-a-classic/>

OTHER MATERIALS

Further materials will be provided in class.