

## 22 UNIVERSITY COURSES IN SCIENCE WRITING IN THE NETHERLANDS

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**If you look at articles at the pages of Dutch daily newspapers, it seems as if research in the sciences is predominant. Seemingly little research in the field of the arts is done. Many articles on these research topics are written by free-lance journalists. Often these are university graduates that have attended a course in writing. It therefore seems safe to assume that the participants of university courses in journalistic writing mainly will be science students. However, the opposite is true: the majority of the 800 students that attend such a course each year, originate from the arts faculties.**

Within the Netherlands journalism is not a main subject at universities. Only one university (Groningen) has a study programme (specialisation) Journalism and there is one post-“doctoraal” programme in journalism (in Rotterdam). Still students are greatly interested in (science) journalism. For this reason various universities created (optional) courses in this field. In general they lie in the margin of the study programme, i.e. they are one of the options in the so-called free space. Students often have to make great efforts to include such a course in their study programme since it was not taken into account by those who drew up the curriculum.

Also because of this marginal position, it is difficult to get insight into this type of education. To offer a remedy for this, we initiated an inquiry amongst all universities (in 1996). All institutions contributed to this inquiry; some (also) referred to foundations and/or professional associations. The information collected was completed with added data from leaflets and brochures. We submitted the results of this survey to the teachers involved to have them checked. For practical reasons we did not pay attention to higher professional education and commercial courses.

In table 1 we listed the collected courses. A number of them is offered two or three times a year. As a consequence of this the number of participants per year is larger than the total of the number of participants per course.

The characters **m**, **s** and **a** behind the average number of participants per course stand for a **m**ixture of disciplines, for science and for **a**rts. We found no courses specifically intended for students of social sciences.

<b>Table 1</b>	<b>University courses in journalistic writing (organisation, name, number of participants, discipline)</b>			
Amsterdam	SCW	Science Correspondence		14
m	UvA	Journalistic science.....	30	m
	UvA	Science Journalism	30	m
	VU	Popularisation of biology and chemistry	20	s
Delft	TUD	Journalistic writing	10	s
Enschede	UT	Science Journalism	25	s
Groningen	HOVO	Journalistic skills	15	m
	RUG	study programme Journalism	35	a
The Hague	KNCV	mini course Science Journalism	25	s
Leiden	RL	Journalistic writing	30	a
	RL	Science Journalism	24	a
Nijmegen	KUN	Writing Effectively	16	m
	KUN	Popularisation of sciences	24	s

Nijmegen	KUN	Reviewing art	25	a
	KUN	Written information	16	a
	KUN	Reporting medicine	10	s
	KUN	science journalism 1 and 2	16	m
Rotterdam	EUR	Post-“doctoraal” programme journalism	20	m
Utrecht	NIBI	Biologists and the press	8	s
	SWJ	Science Journalism	17	m
	UU	Formulating	40	a
	UU	Popular science writing	40	a

This survey only mentions eight from the twelve Dutch universities (apart from three foundations and two professional associations). The University of Nijmegen, the University of Utrecht and the University of Amsterdam are clearly dominant. These are also the institutions with a large faculty / study programme Communication Studies, but we were not able to discover a relationship between the courses in journalism and the departments of Communication Studies. To the contrary, none of the departments is actively involved in a course in (science) journalism.

Strikingly absent are the Agricultural university Wageningen and the University of Brabant. The absence of the AUW is striking since there is a large Faculty of Information and the absence of the UB is remarkable since there is a prospering faculty of arts with much attention for communication. Their students with journalistic ambitions have to go to other educational institutions if they wish to attend a course in writing.

#### Differences

Four types of courses can be easily distinguished (apart from the two long-term courses in Rotterdam and Groningen).

The largest group (nine) aims at journalistic writing about science-in-general (inclusive of subjects concerning the arts). This, inter alia, concerns the courses in Amsterdam and in Utrecht. In this category we also find the nestor: the course Science Correspondence that recently celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

The scope of these general courses varies largely. In some cases it is limited, as in the case of the course Popular science writing in Utrecht, that is only used by arts students and in which in practice only subjects concerning the arts are covered. Sometimes the freedom to choose subjects seems unlimited; an example of this is the course Science Journalism in Nijmegen in which each participant writes about his own special subject.

The second category comprises the four journalistic writing courses for science students. Examples of these are the courses Popularisation at the University of Nijmegen and at the VU (Free University) Amsterdam. In most cases the students are studying biology. To these two courses a journalistic apprenticeship can be coupled; in the mean time more than 150 students have done this. The course of the two professional associations (for chemists and biologists), too, exclusively are intended for participants with a science background.

The two courses in writing about arts are a monopoly of Nijmegen; they may even be part of a larger study package (Information Studies).

The five journalistic courses without an emphasis on science or technology are intended for university students but do not exclusively treat scientific subjects. The basic course Journalistic writing in Leiden, for instance, has as its object to learn arts students to write better.

Courses on (science) journalism should as a matter of course be supervised by teacher who have received the appropriate training. Practice is different. Most teachers have no extensive journalistic or communication background; they often are biologists or have graduated in Netherlands language and literature. However, they often do have some journalistic

experience, for instance as a free-lance science journalist. This is undoubtedly related to the aforementioned marginal position within the curriculum. The visiting lecturers as a rule have a journalistic background; mostly they are editors of daily newspapers.

From the 17 teachers interviewed four are graduates in the Netherlands language and literature and three in biology. Other backgrounds: political science, social sciences, linguistics, chemistry, social geography and history.

These 17 teachers are responsible for the 22 courses signalled and this means that some of them supervise more than one course. From these courses 14 are supervised each time by one teacher / co-ordinator, who is assisted by a number (up to nine) of visiting lecturers. The other courses are supervised by two teachers; they do not make use of visiting lecturers. Most teachers proved not to be familiar with the existence of many other courses; in the best case a teacher knew of the existence of seven (from the 22) competing courses. Only the course Science Correspondence of Frans Kempers of Amsterdam was widely known.

### Study load

By the reduction of the time that in total is available for studying, optional courses more and more tend to get into a tight corner. Since they are in the margin of the study programme, educational and comparable committees again and again must see whether the course is still fitting in the total programme. The scope then is mainly determined beforehand by the total quantity of hours that is available.

Which is the scope of the popular courses in journalistic writing?

The number of sessions proves to vary from two to 26 (Journalistic Science and Public Controversies, UvA) and the duration of the sessions varies from 90 minutes (Formulating, UU) to five hours (Science Journalism, Foundation Scientific Journalism and Information). As a consequence of this it is difficult to compare the courses with each other.

The study load proves to be a more reliable standard for measuring than the scope of the course. This indicates how many hours the average student should minimally spend on the course in order to benefit from it. It both comprises the contact hours mentioned above and the hours the participant needs to do his or her homework. In table 2 the various study loads have been listed.

**Table 2**  
**study load of 20 journalistic courses**  
(exclusive of the two study programmes)

0 - 40 hours	1 course
40 - 80 hours	3 courses
80 - 120 hours	4 courses
120 - 160 hours	5 courses
160 - 200 hours	1 course
200 - 240 hours	2 courses
240 - 280 hours	3 courses
280 - 320 hours	1 course

It seems reasonable to expect that the scope of the course (the number of contact hours) will be proportionate to the study load, but this is not the case. In a diagram of the variables “scope” and “study load” a cloud is seen: there is no clear relation between these two variables.

However, the study load is proportionate to the number of hours for homework, i.e. the number of hours the participant must spend on making assignments. Those vary from the correcting of existing texts to writing a paper. But in most cases it concerns writing popular science articles and interviews with researchers.

The (average) number of hours required for the doing of homework is 90 to 120 hours for making on average eight writing assignments. The objective of most courses is the training of skills and that is also evidenced by the relatively high load of homework. Leader is the course Scientific Journalism of the UvA with a total study load of 280 hours, 240 hours of which have been reserved for the writing of ten articles.

Although in all cases it concerns university courses, their theoretic basis often is small. Many courses only comprise discussions of the work; only in the case of a small number of them the teachers and/or visiting lecturers also pay attention to backgrounds. In the case of no more than six courses a manual is used that offers more than writing advice.

### The participants

The rationale of the existence of university courses is situated in the interest in the courses on the part of the students. If this interest disappears (or if the load of the total study programme forms a serious obstacle for following optional courses) their continuation is threatened. Who are the participants?

The number of participants per course varies from eight to fifty. In many cases that is also the maximal number of participants, i.e. most courses are so popular that they are fully booked each year. The average number of participants of a course group is 20 to 25.

In table 3 the size of the groups of participants has been listed.

**Table 3**  
**Number of participants per course**

0 - 5	-
5 - 10	2 courses
10 - 15	3
15 - 20	5
20 - 25	4
25 - 30	5
30 - 35	1
35 - 40	1
40 - 50	1

The total number of participants per year is more than 800 (!). As it this, this does not necessarily mean that more than 800 persons attend the university training in writing since a number of them attends more than one course. This is also seen in Nijmegen where the course Popularisation of Sciences often is combined with the Studium Generale course Writing Effectively.

From the 800 participants in 1996, 480 have a background in the arts; they mostly are reading Netherlands language and literature or history. 180 participants have a science background; they for the main part are reading biology or chemistry. None of the teachers mentions courses that are specifically intended for students of social sciences (inclusive of communication studies). We will undoubtedly find these in the mix category.

As a rule it is not difficult for students to register for a course in (science) journalism: the admission requirements are not very high and often no or little additional costs is involved in attending them. If we leave the two long term training courses in Groningen and Rotterdam, respectively, out of consideration, the following picture can be given:

**Table 4**  
**Admission requirements and costs of the course for 20 courses**

No special requirements	14 courses
admission requirements (text or interview)	4
prior course required	2
free for students	14
course fee less than NLG 100	1
NLG 100 - NLG 250	1
NLG 250 - NLG 500	1
more than NLG 500	3

The expensive courses are the course Science Correspondence (NLG 650 to NLG 1750), the course Journalistic Skills (NLG 500) and the course Biologists & the Press (NLG 500 to 600).

Why do students include a generally optional course in journalism in their study programme? The evaluation of the courses Popularisation of the Sciences (in Amsterdam and Nijmegen) shows that more than 85 percent attended the course in science journalism in order to learn to write better. 70 percent mentioned their interest in the popularisation of science as an (additional) motivation. The comments of participants showed that many students did not attend the courses to acquire journalistic skills but to improve their writing skills in general. About fifteen percent considered such a course as a starting point of a journalistic career; these are also the participants that subsequently chose for a journalistic apprenticeship. Ninety percent of the participants indicated after the end of the course that according to themselves their skills in writing had been improved due to attending the course. A small number benefited little from the course either because they had too little talent for journalistic writing or because they had been endowed with so many talents that the course offered did not add anything for them.

The method of working during these courses (and many other courses as well) can best be described as “learning by practice” and this seems to be a method that has much appeal for most students. Almost all participants were (very) satisfied with the manner in which university courses in journalism have been organised.

## Discussion

## Literature

*The Report “Courses in Science Journalism” was edited by Patrick Simon and Jaap Willems, Group Popularisation of Sciences University of Nijmegen. Jaap Willems is ass professor in the Popularisation of Sciences at the University of Nijmegen (Faculty of Sciences) and at the Free University of Amsterdam (Faculties of Biology and Chemistry).*