
City, University of London

Department of Journalism

SPECIALISMS

2023-24

Specialisms Modules 2023-24

All nine MA Journalism courses at City, University of London, offer a Specialism module as an elective, or optional course. In 2023/4 some of the pathways, such as Magazine, Newspaper and International Journalism MAs offered up to two specialisms.

The Specialism modules and their tutors listed below were all available in 2023-24 and we plan to run these again, but this cannot be guaranteed. If a tutor is not available, they will be replaced with someone equally suitable.

These modules give you an opportunity to learn about a journalism specialism and develop practical skills. You don't need any specialist knowledge to do any of the modules below, just a willingness to engage with the subject.

All specialisms involve transferable skills, such as contact building; performing at a live (in-person or online) event; cutting through jargon; developing and presenting a story on different platforms; reporting under pressure; and how to find key background details to an issue. So don't be put off trying an unfamiliar subject. Every year students say how much they have gained by taking an unfamiliar topic, as well as building knowledge on a subject they already have some expertise.

The 13 Specialisms on offer

- ☐ Arts and Culture
- ☐ Film, TV, Video and Radio
- ☐ Finance and Business
- ☐ Health and Science
- ☐ Humanitarian Reporting
- ☐ Investigative Reporting
- ☐ Lifestyle
- ☐ Political Reporting
- ☐ Popular Culture
- ☐ Reporting the Middle East
- ☐ Reporting North America
- ☐ Security and Crime
- ☐ Sport

Specialisms in detail

Arts and Culture

This course will deal with intelligent arts journalism in a serious but non-stuffy way. We'll be tackling pitching, reviewing, interviewing, profiling and commentary in the fields of cinema, theatre, music (pop and classical), books and contemporary cultural issues. There will be a series of guest speakers, who'll talk about a range of subjects, from dealing with Hollywood starlets to reviewing for the LRB. Students should be prepared to attend out-of-hours events (films, plays, gigs) for review, although these may be virtual events.

Tutor: Kat Lister is a writer and editor based in London. Beginning her career as a music journalist at the NME, she has gone on to write widely for publications including Guardian, Observer Magazine, Vogue, VICE, The Big Issue, The I and The Independent. In 2017, she joined the editorial team at The Pool, becoming a features and news editor until its demise in 2019. Since her husband's death in 2018, she has focused on investigating her experience of grief, writing widely circulated essays and features for The Sunday Times Magazine and Sunday Times Style. Her first book, The Elements: A Widowhood, was published in September 2021 with Icon Books.

Assessments

- Live review - This is a 500-word review of a live arts performance – gig, theatre, opera, classical music
- Interview - This is either an 800-word profile OR an arts feature identifying a trend or an issue that requires multiple sources

Film, TV, Video and Radio

If you're a film fanatic or television aficionado, this module will help you to harness your love of movies and TV series. Alongside film news, reviews, and interviews, we will be looking at all the different forms that film and TV journalism take, from podcasts to radio broadcasts, to news programmes.

There will be opportunities to pitch ideas, conduct your own interviews and learn about the difference between five-minute junkets and long-form Q&As. You will also be given practical advice on how to navigate being a film journalist by hearing from a multitude of people within the industry who love sharing their expertise with those who are equally as enthused about film and TV.

Tutor: Rhianna Dhillon is a film and TV critic and broadcaster. Starting her career as the film critic for BBC Radio 1 and 1Xtra, she now reviews weekly for BBC6Music and Radio 5Live and appears regularly on news channels covering the latest in the world of film journalism. Rhianna has hosted numerous podcasts and heads up Podpod, an industry podcast about podcasting! She also moderates Q&As for BAFTA, the BFI and various film companies and has interviewed everyone from Martin Scorsese to Michael B. Jordan to Oprah Winfrey.

Assessments

- Interview – You will develop and complete an interview piece, written, 800 words, or equivalent multimedia, with a subject involved in the film, TV, video and/or radio sectors.
- Review – You will complete a 500-word review of a film, TV, video, or radio performance.

Finance and Business

Money makes the world go around. It affects our daily lives. It influences how companies and governments act. Living through cost of living, energy and Covid crises we are being forced to make the connection between the individual human story, the economy and global markets. We'll be looking at how to make these connections real and relevant as governments work out how to raise money to pay the bills.

If you've ever fallen into the trap of thinking that business and financial news is dramatically different from other kinds of reporting, this course will encourage you to think again, providing you with practical skills, knowledge and opportunities to network. Previous speakers include editors from Bloomberg, Reuters and the wider financial press as well as company CEOs.

It will show you how to cut through jargon, help you understand numbers, find new sources and develop ways to scrutinise government and business failures and success. It will help you join the dots between the political, the economic and the human story.

Learn how to turn complicated financial concepts into clear, informative news stories that people want to read. Confidence in knowing how to cover business/financial/economic news gives you a useful skill to offer and can be an advantage in getting a job in journalism or onto prestigious trainee schemes like those at the Financial Times and Reuters.

Along the way we will review a range of issues such as the impact of rising inflation and living costs on the economy, Brexit, globalisation, the significance of financial markets generally, different perspectives on steering the economy and how business works globally. We'll also take a look at the influence of environmental, social and governance (ESG) issues on the economy.

Classes will be taught in-person with at least one session likely to take place outside the classroom and one online to accommodate guest speakers.

Tutor: Camila Reed is a highly experienced multi-media journalist and editor specialising in financial markets, commodities and energy. She has over 20 years' experience in text and TV within Thomson Reuters, where she was a global editor, as well as the BBC World Service and magazines. Camila trains corporates, NGOs and journalists around the globe to get their message across effectively and efficiently. She's not a geek, but she can show you how to make numbers your friend and connect with your audience.

Assessments

- Business news interview of 600 words.
- News feature - a business or economics news feature of 900 words

Health, Science, and the Environment

Thanks to rapid technological advances and the challenges presented by artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, climate change and the pandemic of Covid-19, there has arguably never been a better time to be a health and science journalist.

This module gives students a thorough grounding in how to report on health and science across print, online and broadcast. As well as learning how to read scientific papers, identify appropriate experts and spot examples of 'bad science', this module will teach you how to conduct interviews, pitch stories and be a successful freelancer. Students will also have the opportunity to network and make industry contacts.

Previous field trips include a visit to the press and PR centre of a major medical charity; a bespoke session at the Science Media Centre at the Wellcome Trust; and a visit to the science desk of The Observer.

On completion of the course students will be able to write news reports and produce balanced features on a range of science, health and environmental topics. You'll also learn how to weigh scientific evidence, locate appropriate experts, conduct interviews, and access resources for health and science journalists.

Previous guest speakers include Prof David Spiegelhalter, the Winton Professor for the Public Understanding of Risk at Cambridge University and an expert on statistics; Sarah Boseley, the health editor of The Guardian; and Eric Hand, the European Editor of Science.

Editors regularly ask Mark to recommend students for jobs and placements. Previous students have gone onto national health reporting jobs at the Mail online and Express online.

Tutor: Mark Honigsbaum. A writer and journalist specialising in the history and science of infectious disease, Mark writes regularly on science and health issues for The Lancet, The Observer and Tortoise, as well as other titles.

Mark also produces animations on science subjects for museums and web-based educational platforms, such as TED-ED; blogs for The Gates Foundation, and produces a podcast, Going Viral, exploring the science and history of pandemics, vaccination and conspiracy theories. He is the author of four books, including The Fever Trail: In Search of the Cure for Malaria (Farrar Straus Giroux, 2001) and Living With Enza: the Forgotten Story of Britain and the Great Flu Pandemic of 1918 (Macmillan, 2009), which was nominated for the Royal Society science book of the year. His most recent book, The Pandemic Century: One Hundred Years of Panic, Hysteria, and Hubris (Norton 2019), was selected as an editors' pick by the New York Times and a "health book of the year" by the Financial Times.

Assessments

- News story - 500-word news story based on a real event and/or briefing.
- Interview-led feature story - 600-700 words. Profile of a prominent scientist or medical researcher or an analysis of a current health/science issue.

Humanitarian Reporting

Humanitarian crises go largely under-reported despite a rising number of people facing hunger, conflict, and the impact of the climate change. This collision of crises is forcing more and more people from their homes and the number of refugees and displaced people globally has never been as high.

The main aim of this course is to stoke interest in this fascinating area of journalism and to also help students to pick up the practical skills which can be used in whatever type of journalism or communications they may decide to go into.

Recent topics examined include the politics of aid, ethical storytelling, war reporting, disaster reporting, climate change, the protection of human rights, as the media's handling of safety and trauma.

Guest speakers have included journalists covering wars, poverty and climate change, NGOs, and senior politicians.

Tutor: Belinda Goldsmith, is a journalist and media professional who has reported and led teams from over 50 countries on political, financial, humanitarian and general news. The Global Media Director of Save the Children and former Editor-in-Chief of the Thomson Reuters Foundation. Former board member of Coda Story, trustee of The Charlotte Project, and judge for the European Press Prize.

Assessments

- News story – This is a news story based on a live press conference or other live event. The piece of work is 500 words.
- Analysis/profile – 600-700 words.

Investigative Reporting

Do you look at the news headlines with scepticism, convinced you are only seeing part of the story?

Are you prepared to sift through official reports and company documents for a nugget of information? And learn where to look for the gleam of gold among the mass of data?

Do you want to discover how to talk to people, win their trust, and persuade them to help you find the answers you need?

If the answer to these questions is yes, you might make a good investigative reporter.

“Investigative journalism,” according to a recent survey, “should call the powerful to account, and expose corruption.” It sounds glamorous, but most investigations need many hours of work gathering lots and lots of small details. It also requires perseverance in the face of hard-pressed editors and, more often than not, a determination by those at the centre of a story to refuse to help with, or to attempt to hinder, your work.

With an increasingly attention deficient media heavily reliant on “churning” emailed press releases and gossip “unearthed” on Twitter, this course will provide an introduction to a more in-depth form of reporting.

We will consider how to use the overload of information available on the internet alongside more traditional techniques of developing and maintaining contacts, interviewing sources and analysing documents to develop original, ground breaking stories. Plus, tips on how to get your hard work published.

Guest speakers will include leading investigative reporters who will discuss their work and the methods they have adopted.

Tutor: Jason Lewis is an awarding winning investigative reporter with over 20 years experience working on leading UK publications including the Sunday Telegraph and Mail on Sunday. He now runs the investigative research firm, International Insight.

Assessments

- Profile a named individual from free open-source databases and advanced searching. (600 words)
- An in-depth editorial report (aim at publication or broadcast) on an investigative project of your choice. (1900-2000 words)

Lifestyle

Demand for lifestyle journalism – reporting and analysing ‘the way we live now’ – has exploded both in print and online media in recent years, driving sales of newspapers on Saturdays and Sundays, and dominating the content of innumerable magazines and social media titles.

This specialism helps students to develop the specific skill sets and mindset necessary to shine in this broad, fun and exciting form of journalism, and has a realistic, practical focus throughout. It explores a wide range of subject matter, including food, travel, fashion, well-being and real-life, as well as analysing broader themes in modern culture and talking about branded content. Highlights of the specialism include guest journalists explaining their working methods in detail.

Joint Tutors (Jo and Ash will divide the teaching): Johanna Payton has worked as a freelance lifestyle journalist for 20 years, counting Grazia, Elle, Sunday Times Style, Stylist, Red, and Psychologies amongst her clients. She started her freelance career covering real life stories for the weeklies, before moving into fashion, food and travel, with two popular blogs running alongside her journalism. Johanna also provided branded lifestyle content for the Guardian for over a decade, including two years as a staff commissioning editor for Guardian Labs, so she will be sharing her commercial, as well as editorial, experience on this course.

Ash Bhardwaj is a freelance journalist who writes about travel, current affairs, identity, mental health and diversity. Over the past decade, he has written for The Times, Sunday Times, Daily Mail, Wanderlust and GQ, amongst others. He is a columnist for Telegraph Travel and regularly reports for BBC Radio Four and the World Service. Ash also presents The First Mile and Edgelands podcasts, filmed expedition documentaries including Walking The Nile, etc and founded Digital Dandy - a video storytelling company.

Assessments

- Opinion piece or profile of lifestyle personality (600-700 words) with images.
- Print or video review (500-550 with original images) or video (3-4 minutes).

Political Reporting

The course is intended to be a highly practical examination of the way political reporters cover the increasingly unpredictable UK political scene, with an emphasis on Westminster but also with reference to the European parliament, the UK devolved parliaments and UK local government including the London assembly.

It will look at the way the reporters at Westminster go about their daily duties and how they interact with politicians, spin doctors and special advisers as well as Whitehall departments and the political parties, pressure groups, think tanks, lobbyists and pollsters.

Sessions will examine the history and development of political reporting as well as spin and media manipulation and the way journalists deal with these central elements of reporting politics. It will look closely at the way the media influences, or otherwise, policy making and sets the day-to-day political agenda.

In previous years the course has featured visits to The Commons, The Lords. The Commons' Press Gallery, the BBC's Westminster HQ, a Westminster think tank, and an end-of-year session in the pub with a former leader of the Labour Party! Guest speakers have included senior politicians, political correspondents, spin doctors and other figures from the world of politics.

Previous sessions included: "How the Commons and The Lords work...and produce stories"; "Spin to Win, how the Spin Doctors try to sell their version of the truth"; "Reporting the big political campaigns and elections"; "Brexit, the story that keeps on giving"; "Sources, how to establish and nurture those who can provide or stand up a story"; "The life of a political editor: keeping ahead of the competition" and "The Corbyn phenomena: how young people got interested in politics again, and why the m.s.m. called it wrong". Sessions in 2023 will be along similar lines with regular group discussion about current political events and how they're being covered.

Tutor: Barney Jones worked at the BBC before coming to City. He started a new award-winning political programme in the 1990's - "Breakfast with Frost" - anchored by David Frost, then launched another Sunday political programme "The Andrew Marr Show" which ran for 17 years, setting the political agenda each week. Barney's now Visiting Professor of Journalism at City does media training at Westminster and teaches courses in broadcasting and good governance in North Africa and Eastern Europe. Earlier in his career he worked as a reporter at the House of Commons and in local radio, a producer at "Newsnight" & "BBC Breakfast News" and ran Election coverage at the BBC.

Assessments

- Class presentation – a 10-12 minutes
- Political interview of 800 words.

Popular Culture

Style and writing are at the heart of the course, which is very tightly structured and involves a considerable amount of creative work. Graduates from this specialism have gone on to be novelists as well as leading journalists and broadcasters. To enable this outcome requires abandoning traditional news approaches and finding something radically different. Yes, we re-wire all applicants on entry.

The first half of the course focuses largely on how to interview subjects - both 'unknown' and 'celebrity' and careful tuition in how to manage difficult scenarios. One key factor is psychology – what makes a person tick, and how can you access that inner being.

In the second part, the emphasis shifts to feature writing, reviewing (TV, music, film, theatre, books), imaginative approaches for bringing ideas to the page and investigative reporting within the arena of popular culture – book pirating, ticket scams, bogus talent agencies and more.

Each week, the morning begins with a timed exercise requiring detailed stylistic analysis, followed by a seminar leading to three major pieces of course work. Topics covered are: profile writing; reviewing; features and investigative features; plus a few surprises. Previous visiting guests include senior commissioning editors who graduated from this class, such as Jasmine Gardner, Shaun Philips, Andrew Preston, not forgetting the BBC's Jo Whiley.

Tutor: David Roper, writer, broadcaster and Managing Director of Heavy Entertainment, an independent production company making programmes for TV and radio networks. Previously an Arts reporter at the BBC and Channel 4.

Assessments

- Interview with celebrity = 800 words
- Investigative feature = 1,000 words

Reporting the Middle East

This module aims to introduce and explore issues in and around the Middle East. It will focus on the contemporary Middle East and on the various ways of thinking about, analysing and reporting on that region.

This module will help you apply your journalistic skills to report on what has become one of the most conflict-torn regions in the world. By the end of this module, students should have a clear basic knowledge of the Middle East. You will be working on assessing and covering issues from Turkey to Iran to Syria to Palestine-Israel to Lebanon to Egypt.

The module will help you understand the main lines of cleavage in the Middle East and the major antagonists; explore the political, cultural and other factors that shape journalism in conflict situations; and recognise the cultural, political and other assumptions journalists may carry with them into a reporting assignment and how these impact on their output.

You will be able to absorb media reportage on the Middle East in a critical manner; and be able to write and report with some sensitivity on the region.

This module aims to help journalists - who want to report on or from the Middle East - acquire the critical faculties to be an ethically more responsible actor in a situation of deep conflict.

Tutor: Dr Zahera Harb is Director of MA International Journalism and Journalism Media and Globalisation (Erasmus Mundus) programmes. She has worked as a journalist in Lebanon for Lebanese and international media organisations. Her publications include a monograph titled Channels of Resistance: Liberation propaganda Hezbollah and the Media (I.B. Tauris, 2011) and an edited collection With Dina Matar titled: Narrating conflict in the Middle East: Discourse, Image and Communication Practices in Lebanon and Palestine (I.B. Tauris, 2013). Her recent book is Reporting the Middle East: the Practice of News in the Twenty First Century (I.B. Tauris, 2017). Dr Harb is trustee board member of Ethical Journalism Network and Dart Centre Europe for Journalism and Trauma. She has trained journalists in different parts of the world mainly in conflict torn countries.

Assessments

- Presentation/media critique, 10-12 minutes
- One 1000-word analytical feature

Reporting North America

This module is designed to enable you to deepen your understanding of societal and political issues in North America and learn about the experience of reporting in the region as a correspondent. You will explore topics that are unique to and shared by the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

By the end of the module, you will have examined and learned how to report on major issues like: Political polarisation and elections in federal systems; gun culture, mass shootings and violent crime; police brutality; immigration and borders; racial and ethnic discrimination and disparities; major changes to abortion laws; drug culture and corruption; religious fundamentalism; handling of the pandemic and health care; lingering effects of the 9/11 attacks; media and the entertainment industry.

As a correspondent, you will specifically learn from within to report on how the U.S. views itself, analyse the myth of American exceptionalism, and how the country projects its power and influence on the region and rest of the world. You will hear from experts from media organizations and stakeholders in some of these areas of interest.

You will develop skills on how to identify North American sources and analyse the role and practices of specialist journalists covering the three countries, and plan, develop and produce journalistic reports about the area.

Tutor: Fernando Pizarro is a three-time Emmy-winning journalist, news producer, editor, and correspondent with more than 20 years of experience in television, radio, online and print at media companies in the US, including The New York Times, CNN, NPR, Univision, ESPN, NBC, and APTN. He also has two decades of experience as a Capitol Hill and White House correspondent and producer, serving newscasts covering Washington, national, and international news. He is a lecturer at City, University of London and teaches broadcasting and podcasting.

Assessments

- Analysis piece/profile - 600-700 words in length (written) or equivalent multimedia
- News assignment –a 500-word report on a contemporary political or breaking news in the US

Security and Crime

Reporting on crime and security is a demanding and exciting job. It requires a wide range of skills. Since the rise of al-Qaeda international terrorism has rarely been out of the headlines. The attacks by supporters of Islamic State, and the threats posed by the Taliban taking control of Afghanistan, are the latest examples.

This course covers how to report on UK based terrorism. It also includes domestic terrorism, Irish paramilitary groups, and lone bombers. This involves getting to know all the angles - from MI5, to lawyers, community and pressure groups, as well as the extremists themselves.

A similar approach is taken to reporting on crime - whether it is a piece of analysis about police culture in wake of the murder of Sarah Everard; an interview with a former criminal; a feature on people smuggling gangs; how to get the best out of crime statistics; or talking to a victim of a miscarriage of justice. Preparing court backgrounds and coping with big breaking crime stories are also covered.

This is an extremely practical specialism - students will learn a variety of skills that will prove invaluable in whatever area of journalism they work. It includes how to make contacts; responding to a breaking story; questioning press and police officers; performing at press conferences; and getting exclusives. Previous visits include trips to the National Crime Agency headquarters (Britain's "FBI") to speak to some of the country's top detectives, and the Old Bailey court, as well as a range of guest speakers including former criminals, and correspondents from the BBC, Daily Mail, and Times.

Tutor: Lizzie Dearden was the The Independent's Home Affairs Editor, and previously the Security Correspondent, for 10 years until going freelance in 2023. She writes about extremism, terrorism, crime, policing, and legal affairs. She's also the author of non-fiction book 'Plotters: The UK Terrorists Who Failed', which covers foiled jihadist and far-right attacks in Britain in recent years.

She received a commendation in the crime and legal affairs category of the 2020 British Journalism Awards, for "a range of high-quality exclusive stories on huge matters of public interest".

Before joining The Independent in early 2014, I was a senior reporter at Archant London and freelanced for the Sunday Times.

Assessments

- News story (500 words) - based on a live press conference/interview
- Analysis/profile (600-700 words)

Sport

Sports coverage is a core component for media organisations from tabloid to broadsheet, on television and radio, and across the web and social. Working in it has become one of the most coveted and competitive branches of the media.

This course aims to provide you with insight into how this part of the industry operates enabling you to deal with its unique challenges. You will be taught techniques to enhance your story-gathering and reporting, and given a platform to forge your own career in the field.

The specialism will cover the key elements of sports journalism: live events, interviews, press conferences, features and news reporting. You will learn about the craft as well as the art of sports writing, how to work with the pack, how to work with the desk, how to draw information from an athlete who would rather be playing Call of Duty.

We will also spend time on the most important aspect of all: how to find work. Recent students are now on the sports staff at The Daily Telegraph and Daily Mail.

During the course it is intended there will be contact with leading sports journalists, and a working visit to a live event.

Guests have included TV commentator/presenters Jacqui Oatley and Lynsey Hooper, New York Times writer Rory Smith, the Mirror's John Cross and Athletic editor-in-chief Alex Kay-Jelski.

Students have been taken behind the scenes at Lord's Cricket Ground, Wimbledon (tennis), Stamford Bridge, and into national newspaper sports desks, though it should be stated post-Covid such trips have become much harder to arrange and are not guaranteed.

Assuming there are no further Covid class will be taught in-person with at least one session likely to take place outside the classroom and not necessarily on a Friday morning.

Tutor: Glenn Moore is a freelance journalist who in recent years has covered, among other things, the Premier League for the Sunday Times, women's football for World Soccer and Wimbledon tennis for Australian Associated Press. A City journalism graduate he was for 23 years on staff at The Independent, primarily as football correspondent, then football editor. He was previously a cricket writer for Reuters, a sub-editor for the Telegraph, and along the way has covered World Cups in three sports plus everything from hockey to horse-racing, angling to table-tennis.

Assessments

- Match report/news – a 500-word report of a live event or a 600-word sports news story.
- Feature/interview to include an interview/s with sportsman/woman. 900-words or video equivalent.

NOTE: Selection process

One of the advantages of the specialisms is that they are taught in small groups. Last year the maximum was 20 students per specialism. This allows greater interaction between the tutor, guest speakers, and students. It also means that you can be taken on outside trips to events, such as press conferences, live reports, or to meet sources related to the specialism.

To ensure groups are kept to a manageable size students are asked to make three choices. More than 90 per cent of students got their first choice in 2023/24, and the remainder their second. City reserves the right not to run a Specialism if not enough students pick it as their first choice.