From Page to Praxis:
A serendipitous start to writing about science
By Zoe Shinefield

The course was born of a convergence of accidental happenings, each one without which my semester might have looked very different. To start off, I was intent on trying something new. With the pandemic still spreading, my hopes to study abroad had been deflated. I had not, however, lost my longing for new experiences; and so, I contacted Nell in the Career and Civic Engagement Center. Nell and I knew of each other from previous work I had done with the center, and though I wasn't really sure what I was looking for, Nell and I identified numerous contacts through which I might find a lead.

The serendipity of the whole thing has not been lost on me, for at this point, two very important changes had already occurred. First, a professor that I admired but had not yet had the opportunity to take a class with returned from sabbatical and decided to teach a half-credit course called *Writing Science*. The course combined her experiences as a chemist and a writer and offered space for students to explore science in many different written forms. Though half-credit courses are common for physical education and the arts, the same cannot be said for half-credit academic courses, and so this was a unique opportunity. The second change was that the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP) at the University of Pennsylvania expanded its research teams to include thematic research in addition to the usual regional teams. One of these new teams was set to research environmentally oriented think tanks, which perfectly aligns with my experience in environmental policy. The research internship with TTCSP had been highly recommended to me by multiple alums, and so after being offered an intern

position on the environment team I set to work creating a Praxis course that would combine my love of research with my interest in science and written communication.

I enrolled in the half-credit *Writing Science* course, and my professor agreed to oversee the Praxis as my Faculty Advisor. Around the same time, I began my internship with the TTCSP. I received my acceptance email just one day before the first meeting, unsure exactly what to expect. That first week, the environment team had only two other members, and both were as new and confused as I was. Our team had not yet been assigned a Project Lead, or PL; PLs attended weekly meetings to share progress and ask questions, and it quickly became clear to me that we needed someone in that meeting. In less than two weeks, I took on the new role of environment team PL and began recruiting new members.

The course became an intensification of the half-credit *Writing Science* course, which I playfully titled *Writing Science and Beyond: An Exploration of Written Science, Policy Analysis, and Other Scholarly Works.* My intention was to become a better writer of not only my own research but of all kinds. With the direction of my Faculty Advisor, I studied the art of editing and collaborative writing while reading two instructional books: *The Craft of Science Writing* and *Thinking Like your Editor*. On my own time, I read a variety of works that reflected different voices and approaches to science writing, including a transdisciplinary non-fiction book and several science fiction novels (for a full list of what I read this semester, see the reading list below). One story in particular, *The Collapse of Western Civilization,* inspired me to rework sections of a scientific paper I had written into a science fiction piece. Seeing my concise scientific explanations punctuate the flowery language of fiction was unlike anything I'd written before. Experimental

writing like this allowed me to explore both my research and the methods with which I communicate it in new and creative ways.

Meanwhile, the environment team grew from three to eight excellent interns and began producing results. The objective was to produce a written report exploring the challenges and opportunities of environmental think tanks around the world using both qualitative and quantitative research. The key findings in this report would then be translated into a PowerPoint presentation and shared with environmental think tank executives and scholars. I loved the work, and quickly put together a plan for completing the research. I delegated tasks to my teammates, wrote instructional resources (which would eventually become the methods section of our report), and fixed any errors or gaps in the data we collected. The experience included far more than just the research. I got to know my colleagues, many of whom worked remotely from places I had never been to. We had guest speakers every week: successful alums, experts and executives. I attended two virtual summits during which I heard think tank executives from around the world talk about the future of think tanks and the power of female leadership. I became the editor for my teams collaboratively written literature review and continued writing short pieces for my end-of-semester portfolio.

Accidental happenings such as these occur simultaneously everywhere; the challenge is to locate the pieces and find how they fit. As with a good science story, an enriching Praxis experience goes far beyond the imagination of its audience, tying together seemingly unrelated themes as to better understand the connections between them. Though it was not immediately obvious how my research and coursework intersected, the variety of work that I did diversified and

deepened my learning. At the end of the semester, I found that the connections had helped me become a leader and advocate of my own educational experiences.

Reading list for a science writing enthusiast:

The Craft of Science Writing: Selections from The Open Notebook edited by Siri Carpenter (multi-author writing guide)
Think Tank Traditions: Policy Research and the Politics of Ideas edited by Diane Stone and Andrew Denham (scholarly work)
Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies by Jared Diamond (transdisciplinary non-fiction book)
Smelling Lessons by Clare Batty (scholarly work)
Scents and sensibility by Michelle Francl (essay)
Digital Disruptions and the Emergence of Virtual Think Tanks by Andreas Kraemer
The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy series by Douglas Adams (comedy science fiction)
Never Let Me Go by Kazuo Ishiguro (dystopian science fiction novel)
Thinking Like Your Editor: How to Write Great Serious Nonfiction – and Get It Published by Susan Rabiner and Alfred Fortunato (writing guide)
The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway (historical science fiction)