MEJO 358.1 Syllabus

                                                    Opinion Writing
                                                         Fall 2019

                                Tuesday and Thursday, 11 a.m. to 12:15 p.m.
                                                 Carroll Hall, Room 268

Instructor: Angelia Herrin
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Office Hours: Tuesdays 12:15 to 2L30 p.m. or by appointment

Opinion writing in the form of editorials, columns, reviews and letters to the editor has been part of journalism as long as newspapers have been published. But with the explosion of social media platforms, anyone with a device and a little attitude can now publish their opinion on national politics, local sports or the latest Avenger movie.  And in this “real time” media era, we get bombarded by way too many opinions based on falsehoods that seem to travel faster than the facts.

So good opinion writers are needed now more than ever. In this class we are going to focus on building opinion pieces that argue from the facts, with the passion for ideas and issues – large and small – that our readers care about. We will look at how opinion writers in many forms – editorials, personal columns/blogs, critical reviews – construct convincing arguments. You will develop your skills in finding topics, doing research, picking the right tone and style and delivering a compelling, persuasive piece.

Like all the good journalism great opinion pieces depend on great reporting, thinking and writing. Studying opinion writing should enhance those skills: As good journalists, you need to be able to pick up the rocks in your head and look under them to understand just what’s behind your own opinions/beliefs/biases.

It’s demanding work, but it won’t be boring. As, William Allen White said in 1923, an opinion writer has only one obligation:

 “To comment upon the truth as candidly as possible, never forgetting to be merry, for after all, the liar and the cheat and the panderer are smaller offenders than the solemn ass.”

What You Will Learn

•    How to build arguments with facts, not insult and innuendo, in ways than can lead readers through competing ideas
•    How to identify topics that resonate with your readers and conduct the research that will help you not just describe the issue, but possible solutions
•     How different devices and structures used in writing editorials, columns and reviews create impact
•    How to develop the “personal” in writing opinion and when to get out of the way
•    How America has been arguing about - and making fun of-  the same things for the last 300 years
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How We Will Work

This class is based on discussion of readings, in-class interviews with experts in the field, as well as lecture, workshopping of assignments and your own presentations.  Some assignments are in-class and team-based. That means well-prepared attendance is mandatory. Failure to participate in the debates and critiques in our meetings will lower your grade. Failure to promptly turn in assignments, which will be used in class discussion, will lower your grade.

There is no required text book.  I expect you to use the AP Stylebook and JOMC Stylebook, http: //jschoolstylebok.web.unc.edu. Much of the reading will come from articles, and links posted on our class site, as well handouts, so check the site early and often.

This is a writing AND reading class. To write well you must study models; You need to figure out what you want to imitate and what you hate. You are expected to read not just the assignments, but opinion writing in many outlets. Focus on the News and Observer, New York Times and Washington Post: A quick look at these should find at least one piece each day to get your juices going! One student will be assigned to make a presentation on an editorial/or column each class.

As an instructor, I think each student arrives in my classroom with particular traits, needs and skills. When I work with you, it's as if I'm the reporter, trying to figure out what the story is behind each person, what are they struggling with, what do they really want to do, and how can I help take them to the next level. That means I’ll be talking to you a lot, as a group and individually. READ MY EMAILS!!

Assignments

      There are five graded writing assignments, and a final project:
•    Assigned topic editorial
•    Personal choice editorial
•    Assigned column
•    Personal choice narrative column
•    Review

You will get specific word count and direction for each assignment. Only the columns can be written in the first-person: we will talk in class about just how powerful the “I” voice can be and how distracting/dangerous/dumb that focus on “me” can be.

If you want to be successful, start thinking NOW about the issues and ideas that you care about and want to explore with research and interviewing. DON’T expect to focus  on nuclear disarmament. Focus on issues that have local angle and impact, issues you can get your reporting arms around and your heart cares about.

There will be workshopping of each assignment and you will have a chance to rewrite each piece for your final grade. If you have a question or a concern about the direction of an assignment or instructor, don’t wait until the last minute to clarify.

A NOTE ON THE Final There is no exam for this class. The final will be a 1,200 word op-ed based on research and original reporting that tackles an issue and promotes a solution. Like all the assignments, this will be judged on the basis of the selection of a compelling topic, the depth of reporting, the construction of a convincing argument and the strength of the  writing. Don’t go after the easy, simple and obvious: Pieces that engage readers, connect them to the issues and explain the need for action will get the top grades.

 You MUST submit a writing memo for the final topic that is approved by your instructor. This will help tighten your focus and get advice on research and reporting. These first draft pieces will be workshopped last weeks of class and you will receive instructor comments, along with comments from your fellow students.

The final version of your project is due the day of class exam, Thursday, Dec 12 at noon.

Grading

 All grading on stories is to a great extent subjective, just like the opinions of editors and readers. You will be graded on your reporting, research, enterprise, clarity of writing, precision and style, as well as your ability to engage the reader. Style and grammar mistakes will take points off, no matter how good the piece. The writing exercise assignments will be graded pass/fail. Your attendance matters in grading classwork, as does your preparation. It will be easy for me to see when you don’t do the reading, since so much of this class depends on smart discussion.

Grade breakdown

Classwork - 20 percent
Editorial One -10 percent
Editorial Two  -10 percent
Column -10 percent
Column 10 percent
Review- 10 percent
Final - 30 percent

Your instructor approaches your class as an editor working with writers. You will be getting feedback on assignments and article memos, as well as in class and one-on-one discussion. You should always know how you are doing in class at all times, and where you are headed. IF YOU DO NOT KNOW OR ARE PUZZLED BY THE GRADES, ASK ME!!!!!!

Generally speaking, the grades on assignments work this way:

A = Strong, publishable engaging piece, well-written with context and logic for conclusion,  no fact or style errors
B = Near publishable piece, with minor errors of style or logic, needs revisions for readability, but no  fact errors
C = Not ready for publication piece, with serious errors of style, reporting gaps and readability
D = Sub-par, unpublishable, with major errors in style, logic, approach, reporting gaps and low level of reader engagement
F = Unacceptable work that ignores requirements of the assignments; style and fact errors, minimal reporting, lazy writing.

Each assignment will be awarded points that translate into grades above. Points add up!

 A: 92-100
A-: 90-92
B+: 88-90
B: 82-88
B-: 80-82
C+: 78-80
C: 72-78
C-: 70-72
D: 72 -64

F: Below 64.

Honor Code:
I expect that each student will conduct himself or herself within the guidelines of the University honor system (http://honor.unc.edu). All academic work should be done with the high levels of honesty and integrity that this University demands. You are expected to produce your own work in this class. Using a set-up sound bite is a violation of the honor code.  If you have any questions about your responsibility or your instructor’s responsibility as a faculty member under the Honor Code, please see the course instructor or Senior Associate Dean C. A. Tuggle, or you may speak with a representative of the Student Attorney Office or the Office of the Dean of Students.

Seeking Help:
If you need individual assistance, it’s your responsibility to meet with the instructor. If you are serious about wanting to improve your performance in the course, the time to seek help is as soon as you are aware of the problem – whether the problem is difficulty with course material, a disability, or an illness.

Diversity:
The University’s policy on Prohibiting Harassment and Discrimination is outlined in the 2011-2012 Undergraduate Bulletinhttp://www.unc.edu/ugradbulletin/. UNC is committed to providing an inclusive and welcoming environment for all members of our community and does not discriminate in offering access to its educational programs and activities on the basis of age, gender, race, color, national origin, religion, creed, disability, veteran’s status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

Special Accommodations:
If you require special accommodations to attend or participate in this course, please let the instructor know as soon as possible. If you need information about disabilities visit the Department of Disability Services website at http://disabilityservices.unc.edu/

ACCREDITATION:

The School of Journalism and Mass Communication’s accrediting body outlines a number of values you should be aware of and competencies you should be able to demonstrate by the time you graduate from our program.  Learn more about them here:
http://www2.ku.edu/~acejmc/PROGRAM/PRINCIPLES.SHTML#vals&comps

No single course could possibly give you all of these values and competencies; but collectively, our classes are designed to build your abilities in each of these areas.  In this class, we will address a number of the values and competencies, with special emphasis on the last six bullet dots under "Professional values and competencies" in the link above.

Class Schedule

**THURSDAY, January 9**

Opening Day!
How does this class work? What is the G.I. Joe fallacy? Find out more and all the answers to your assignment questions. You will do an in-class interview, so come prepared with note-taking utensils.
Interview Assignment Due: noon, SUNDAY, January 12. in Sakai

FOR NEXT CLASS READ: What Great Opinion Writing Can Do Package on Sakai

**TUESDAY, January 14**

What Can Great Opinion Writing Do?

Let’s look at the history of objectivity and opinion in American journalism. As a reader, you already know what makes a great opinion piece whether it is an editorial, a column or a review – you just need a vocabulary to describe it. Let me help.

FOR NEXT CLASS Spend some Time with The Times Analysis Due in Sakai at 9 a.m., THURSDAY, January 16

**THURSDAY, January 16**

If You Build a Good Editorial, They Will Read It

We discuss your analysis assignment and move to talking about the building blocks of a great editorial. Let’s discuss a topic and start building your first editorial

Editorial Exercise Due: noon, SUNDAY January 19 in Sakai

**TUESDAY, January 21**

It’s Good, But It Can be Better
Group workshop your first editorial exercise. While we are at it, let’s talk about the fine art of editing and critique and how we will partner this semester.

Rewrite Assignment Due: noon, Friday, January 24 in Sakai

FOR NEXT CLASS READ: POV Package

**THURSDAY, January 23**
It Helps If You Have a Point

Student Presentations start
Let’s talk about finding your angle on editorials and how you bring your Point of View into focus.  And are you sure your POV stands on facts? What happens when you jump to conclusion without thorough research? How do bad players use questionable research to back up a fake point?

Assigned editorial Due: noon SUNDAY, January 26 in Sakai

**TUESDAY, January 28**

The Spirited Art of Distilling the Right Information

Student Presentation
Workshop Your First Editorial. We will talk about what and how to distill information in persuasive writing. What can links do for reader?
Assigned Editorial Rewrite Due: 6 p.m., FRIDAY, January 31, in Sakai

FOR NEXT CLASS READ:  North Carolina Opinion Package

**THURSDAY, January 30**

How Do We Share a Vision of The Great North State?

Student Presentation
Discussion with Peter St. Onge, Editorial Director, North Carolina Opinion
We’re focusing on picking topics that are relevant to our audience? How should we think about writing for this audience – and opening the door to bring in new readers?

FOR NEXT CLASS READ:  Structure Package: Think about using different structures in your Personal Choice editorial!

Personal Choice Editorial Due: noon Sunday, February 2 in Sakai

**TUESDAY, February 4**

Is There More Than One Way to Build an Argument?

Student presentation
Workshop your personal choice editorial
We look at structures and devices for editorial writing. There are tricks writers should have up their sleeves to use at the right time.

You ALL have an assignment to bring based on the State of the Union, which is TONIGHT, February 4. Discussion will be student lead in CLASS

Personal Choice Editorial rewrite due SUNDAY 9 a.m., February 9 in Sakai

FOR NEXT CLASS: Read the Op-ed Package

**Thursday, February 6**

May the Force Be with You

Student Presentation: We discuss SOTU.
Then we answer the question: How is a good op-ed piece is like Star Wars? Do you know how to identify and take down your Evil Opponent! Let’s talk about that and review your final project memo requirements. **Your memo is due February 16**, because we review them in class and you need feedback before you head out for fall break.

**TUESDAY, February 11**

Is it ALL About You?

Student Presentation

Let’s start talking about the uses of first person in opinion writing. Sometimes a powerful tool. Sometimes, not so much. While we are at it, let’s talk about arguing.

Your First-Person Column Due: 9 a.m., February 13. THIS IS A FAST TURNAROUND

**THURSDAY, February 13**

Reading ALL about You

Student Presentation

Workshop First Person assignment. And let’s talk about how first person can go awry.

Rewrite of First Person Due: noon Sunday, February 16

**TUESDAY, February 18**

Pressure Test Your Idea BEFORE You Hit the Road

Student Presentation

We do an in-class exercise. Then we start spitball discussion around your final project memo. This means you will present your ideas and be challenged/aided by your colleagues (and me!) COME PREPARED! The more you put into this, the smarter your final will be!!!

**THURSDAY February 20**

More Pressure Tests

Student Presentation

Spitball continues!

**THURSDAY February 25**

Student Presentation

Spitball wraps up

For Next Class Read Column Package

**THURSDAY February 27**

Show Me How the Idea Works: Narrative Columns

Student Presentation
Call it a column or a blog, this story-telling form of opinion writing has made a comeback. Let’s talk about how you are going to write one for next class

**TUESDAY MARCH 3**

Student Presentation

Workshop your great narrative column

FOR NEXT CLASS READ: Different Points of View Package

Rewrite of Narrative Column Due: noon, Friday, March 6

**THURSDAY, March 5**

Pushback, Blowback and Boycotting

Letters to the Editor were THE thing. Then reader comments became a thing. Then the whole thing devolved into name-calling. So how should we deal with differing points of view? Where have organizations erred with “guest columns” Should readers boycott a paper over a columnist? And what about “Mr. Anonymous?”

**SPRING BREAK**

**TUESDAY, March 10**

NO CLASS

**THURSDAY, March 12**

NO CLASS

FOR NEXT CLASS READ Review Package on Sakai!

**TUESDAY, March 17**

**My Brilliant Reviews**

**We do an in-class exercise, we look at some great reviews and talk about how you will tackle your next two writing projects!**

**THURSDAY, March 19**

**No class at 11 a.m., Instead we’re going to Playmakers Theater at 7:30 p.m., to see Julius Caesar so you can write a review**

**Your review is due 6 p.m. SUNDAY March 22.**

**Tuesday March 24**

**Workshop our Theater Reviews.**

**Discussion: Can you be sued for your review opinion?**

**THURSDAY, March 26**

Student Presentation

A Reviewer Reviews Best Practices with us?
Did You Send Instructor the Memo on Your Review Topic? Did you sign up for your final project consult?

Your personal review is due at 6 p.m. Sunday, March 30

**TUESDAY, March 31**

**Student Presentation**

**Workshop your personal choice review: Ten Percent Club in Class Exercise**

**THURSDAY, April 2**

**No formal Class: COME TO TALK TO ME**

**Mandatory check-in** with me about your final project. There will be a sign-up sheet that provides time slots on four different days to discuss the speed bumps/brick walls you are encountering in reporting and writing. Show up! You will be glad you did.

**TUESDAY, April 7**

**What’s so funny about peace, love and understanding?**

Explore humor columns with one of the best

**THURSDAY, April 9**

Presentations Start! Group one

**TUESDAY, April 15**

Presentation Group Two

**THURSDAY, April 16**

Presentations Group Three

**TUESDAY, April 21**

Last batch of Presentations

**THURSDAY, April 23**

**LAST LECTURE: The Greatest Hits and Class Redesign project**

**YOUR FINAL PROJECT IS DUE MONDAY 6 p.m.**

**Your FINAL IS TUESDAY, April 27**

THIS IS YOUR SCHEDULED FINAL DATE Note we meet at NOON in our regular classroom to look at the greatest hits from Final Projects and celebrate the Amazing work you have done.