

MEJO 358.1 Syllabus

Opinion Writing
Fall 2019

Tuesday and Thursday, 11 a.m. to 12:15 p.m.
Carroll Hall, Room 0021

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Office Hours: 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 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 that 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

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, reserve readings 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.

Assignments

There are five graded writing assignments, and a final project:

- Assigned topic editorial
- Personal choice editorial
- Assigned column
- Personal essay
- 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 in the next millenium. 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 1,000 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 colleagues.

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

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.

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 piecepiece, 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: Below 70

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 Bulletin <http://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

Tuesday

August 20

Opening Day!

How does this whole class work? Assignments discussion and in-class interview.

Interview Assignment Due: 8 a.m. WEDNESDAY in Sakai

FOR NEXT CLASS READ: What Great Opinion Writing Does Package

Thursday

August 22

So What DOES Great Opinion Writing Do?

What's the history of objectivity and opinion in American journalism? What makes a great opinion piece whether it is an editorial, a column or a review?

Analysis Assignment Due noon SUNDAY in Sakai

TUESDAY

August 27

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 and start building one.

Editorial Exercise Due 8 p.m. WEDNESDAY

FOR NEXT CLASS READ: Critique Package

THURSDAY

August 29

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 critique!

Rewrite Assignment Due: Sunday noon

FOR NEXT CLASS READ: POV News Story Package

HAVE A GREAT LABOR DAY WEEKEND

TUESDAY

September 3

“It Would be Helpful If You Have a Point”

Student Presentations start

Let’s talk about your angle on editorials and how you bring your Point of View into focus. And are you sure you POV stands on facts? What happens when you jump to conclusion without thorough research?

Assigned editorial due: WEDNESDAY 6 p.m.

THURSDAY

September 5

Workshop Your First Editorial

Assigned Editorial Rewrite Due Sunday September 8 noon

FOR NEXT CLASS READ: North Carolina Opinion Package

TUESDAY

September 10

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

Discussion with Peter St. Onge, Editorial Director , North Carolina Opinion

We’re focusing on picking topics that are relevant to our audience and writing papers tackle the biggest issues and find new ways to bring in the audience.

FOR NEXT CLASS READ: Structure Package

THURSDAY

September 12

So Many Issues, So Many Devices

We look at structures and devices for editorial writing. There are tricks writers have up their sleeves to use at the right time. You are thinking about your personal choice editorial, aren’t you? How are you going to use interviews? Let’s pressure test your ideas in class.

Personal Choice Editorial Assignment due Sunday at noon

FOR NEXT CLASS READ: Critique Package

TUESDAY

September 17

The Colored Pencils Editing Session
Workshop Second Editorial

Your rewrite is due Wednesday at 8 p.m.

FOR NEXT CLASS READ: Pulitzer Prize Winner Package

THURSDAY

September 19

Why You Should Talk To Yourself When You Write

What happens when you take on political figures? How does a school shooting become a crusade for the editorial page? How do you make readers care about climate change? How does one of the country's best editorial writers do this day after day and build readership? We talk with Florida Sun-Sentential Editorial Page Editor Rosemary O'Hara.

FOR NEXT CLASS READ: Project Memo and op Ed Examples in Sakai

Tuesday

September 24

May The Force Be With You

How a good op-ed piece is like Star Wars? You have to 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 October 6, as we review them in class and you need feedback before you head out for fall break.

FOR NEXT CLASS READ: Different Points of View Package

THURSDAY

September 26

Pushback, Blowback and Boycotting

Letters to the Editor were a 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,”

Your Final Project Memo is Due SUNDAY October 6
You must post in assignments and on Class Board

Tuesday
October 8

Raising the Stakes

We do an in-class exercise. Then we start spitball discussion around your final project memo. COME PREPARED! The more you put into this, the easier your final will be!!!

Thursday
October 10

Raising the Stakes Part II

Continue to spitball the final project memos.

FOR NEXT CLASS READ: Columns package in Sakai

Tuesday
October 15

Let's Get Personal

Guest Columnist talks with us about how it is done - brilliantly

Your assigned column is due Oct. 20

THURSDAY, October 17 FALL BREAK

No Class

TUESDAY

October 22

What to Leave In, What to Leave Out

Workshop your Assigned Columns

Rewrite due Wednesday 9 p.m.

FOR NEXT CLASS READ: Essay Package

THURSDAY

October 24

The Essay Makes a Comeback

Call it a column, a blog, an essay this personal form of writing has made a comeback. Let's talk about how you are going to write one for next class

Your Personal essay due Sunday, September 27

TUESDAY

October 29

NO CLASS

THURSDAY

October 31

Wait, Where are You Going to Publish That?

Let's workshop your column and talk about where to publish it. And beware, anything can happen on Halloween.

SIGN UP FOR YOUR CONSULT

TUESDAY

November 5

Consults: No class as I will be doing one on one consultations about the status of your project. I will have share specific requirements

FOR NEXT CLASS READ: Review Package

Did You Send Instructor The Memo on Your Review Topic?

THURSDAY

November 7

OMG, That Show/Movie/Book Really Sucked

What do good review really do? How do you critique while also informing and inspiring? And can we talk about colloquial language?

TUESDAY

November 12

OMG Your Review is AWESOME

Workshop Reviews

Rewrite due Wednesday 6 p.m.

Thursday

November 14

Because it is a Group Experience We do a review together.

Tuesday

November 19

Presentations

Thursday

November 21

Presentations

TUESDAY

November 26

Presentations

Thursday

November 28 NO CLASS HAPPY THANKSGIVING

Tuesday

December 3

Final Class. Wrap up and final instructions.

FINAL DUE WHEN YOU COME TO CLASS DECEMBER 12, at NOON.

