                                                    Opinion Writing  
                                                  MEJO 358.1   Fall 2020  
                                                          
                                Monday and Wednesday, 8 a.m. to 9:15 a.m.  
                                                 Zoom Room:   
 <https://unc.zoom.us/j/98886011955?pwd=NUs5dFRLMTFsb3lyVUF6U08ycHM2UT09>

Passcode: 555048

Instructor: Angelia Herrin  
Class website: <https://sakai.unc.edu/portal/site/opinionspring2020>

Email: angelial@email.unc.edu (BEST WAY TO REACH ME)  
Phone: 857 753 6766  
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 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 impact the daily lives of our readers. 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 the great editor 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  
.

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 Sakai 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, I'm a reporter, trying to figure out what the story is behind each person, what are they struggling with, what 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 assignments and a final project. The assignments are:  
•    Assigned topic editorial  
•    Personal choice editorial  
•    Assigned column  
•    Personal choice narrative column  
•    Review

You will get specific word count and direction for each assignment. Editorial cannot be written in the “I” voice: other assignments will be identified for First Person use. 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 SUNDAY, APRIL 26.

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

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: 93-100  
A-: 90-92  
B+: 87-89  
B: 84-86  
B-: 80-83  
C+: 74-79  
C: 73-78  
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.

**DAY-BY-DAY OPINION CLASS SCHEDULE**

**MONDAY, August 10**  
  
**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 to take notes,

Interview Assignment Due: Tuesday, Aug. 11, at noon in Sakai.

FOR NEXT CLASS, READ: What Great Opinion Writing Can Do package on Sakai.

**WEDNESDAY, August 12**

**What Is the Job of (Great) Opinion Writing?**

Let’s look at the history of objectivity and opinion in American journalism and the failure of what some readers call “The View from Nowhere.” Now, how do you write a great opinion piece? 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 Review sections and perform an analysis of the content. Due Sunday, Aug. 16, at noon in Sakai.

FOR NEXT CLASS, READ: Editorial Building Blocks package on Sakai.

**MONDAY, August 17**

**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, run a group brainstorm and start writing your first editorial. We also review requirements for the weekly student presentation.

Editorial exercise due: Tuesday, Aug. 18, at 6 p.m., in Sakai.

FOR NEXT CLASS, READ: Editing package on Sakai

**WEDNESDAY, August 19**

**It’s Good, But It Can Be Better**

Let’s review that 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. And get ready to write your first editorial, with a class brainstorming that digs into an idea.

Write FIRST ASSIGNED EDITORIAL. Due Sunday, Aug. 23, noon in Sakai.

**MONDAY, August 24**  
  
**Student Presentation**

WORKSHOP Group Editorial

Let’s talk about finding your angle on editorials and how you bring your point of view (POV) into focus.

Your editorial rewrite is due Wednesday, Aug. 26, at 8 a.m. in Sakai.

FOR NEXT CLASS, READ: Links package in Sakai.

**WEDNESDAY, August 26**

**Student Presentation**

Are you sure your POV stands on facts? What happens when you jump to a conclusion without thorough research? How do bad players use questionable research to back up a fake point? How can links help you and the reader? We will talk more about what and how to distill information in persuasive writing: Hint: Determining which links to include is a challenge for many starting writers. What can links do for reader? Let’s take apart your next editorial assignment.

**FOR NEXT CLASS, READ: Atlanta Constitution package in Sakai.**

**MONDAY, August 31**

**Student Presentation**

**The Hard Work of Editorial Pages**

Discussion with Andre Jackson, editor of the Atlanta Journal Constitution op-ed page. We are incredibly lucky to get him to talk with us about the challenges of running an op-ed section at a time of great challenges in his city and state that have created great clashes of opinion. Let talk with him about how he focuses on topics and how he thinks about writing for this audience.

FOR NEXT CLASS, READ: Structure package—start thinking about using different structures in your personal choice editorial!

**WEDNESDAY, September 2**

**Student Presentation**  
We look at structures and devices for editorial writing. There are tricks every writer should have up their sleeves to use at the right time. Let’s brainstorm your personal choice editorial.

Personal Choice Editorial: Due Sunday, Sept. 6, at in Sakai.

FOR NEXT CLASS, READ: Op-ed package in Sakai.

**MONDAY, September 7, NO CLASS: Labor Day**

**WEDNESDAY, September 9**

**Student Presentation**

**But That’s Your Opinion**

**WORKSHOP: Personal choice editorial.**

**Opinion pages—which feature articles that are not staff written, but rather penned by experts, politicians and cultural lights—have become increasing important on media sites. But they also are increasingly controversial. Let’s start talking about op-ed pieces that work—and those that fail.**

**Your editorial rewrite is due Friday, Sept. 11, at noon in Sakai.**

**FOR NEXT CLASS, READ: Fighting over the op-ed page in Sakai.**

**MONDAY, September 14**

**Student Presentation**

**May the Force Be with You**

We are going to explore the battle over just what appears an op-ed page and the furor that debate has caused in newsrooms across the country. And we explore these questions: How is a good op-ed piece 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. THIS IS AN IMPORTANT DISCUSSION: **Your memo is due September 25**. We review them in class, and you need feedback!

FOR NEXT CLASS, READ: 1619 Project and Criticism package, also the Reparations package in Sakai. NOTE this is a large package.

**WEDNESDAY, September 16**

**Student Presentation**

Reviewing the 1619 Project and Reparations: This project, spearheaded by a UNC graduate, Hannah Nikole-Jones, has created an important discussion in our country—and stirred some furious backlash. It won the Pulitzer Prize for Commentary and won attacks from people like Secretary of State Mike Pompeo Let’s talk about the work and how it cracked open debate.

FOR NEXT CLASS. READ: Uses of First Person packet in Sakai.

**MONDAY, September 21**

**Student Presentation**

**Is It ALL About You?**

We will wrap up discussion of 1619. And then let’s talk about first-person writing. Your instructor is VERY opinionated on this topic. She expects you will be, too. Let’s talk about when it works and when it doesn’t!

**WEDNESDAY, September 22**

**Student Presentation**

**Bring the Reader Along**

We will do an in-class first-person exercise. Then, let’s talk about your first-person column and how to blend facts and emotion. As Anne Lamott says, You must risk placing real emotion at the center of your work…Write toward vulnerability. Don’t worry about appearing sentimental, worry about being unavailable, worry about being fraudulent.”

Your first-person column is due Sunday, Sept., 26 at noon

Your final project memo is due Saturday, Sept. 25, at noon

**MONDAY, September 28**

**Student Presentation**

**WORKSHOP: First-person column**

**FOR NEXT CLASS READ: Narrative Columns and Guest Speaker package in Sakai.**

**WEDNESDAY, September 30**

**Student Presentation**

**Guest Speaker**

Let’s explore how narrative columns work and discuss developing a story arc that draws the reader in to support your POV.

Your narrative column is due Sunday, Oct. 4, at noon in Sakai.

**MONDAY, October 5**

**Student Presentation**

**WORKSHOP: Narrative column**

**FOR NEXT CLASS: Polish up that final project memo.**

**WEDNESDAY, October 7**

**Does Your Final Project Stick?**

**Student Presentation**

COME PREPARED! We start the Spitball exercise with your final project memo. The more you put into this, the smarter your final will be!!!

**MONDAY, October 12**

**Student Presentation**

Spitball continues!

FOR NEXT CLASS, READ: Who Is Funnier: The Right or the Left? package in Sakai.

**WEDNESDAY, October 14**

**Student Presentation**

Spitball wraps up.

FOR NEXT CLASS, READ: Different Points of View and Endorsements package in Sakai.

**MONDAY, October 19**

**Student Presentation**

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? Should readers boycott a paper over a columnist? And what about “Mr. Anonymous”? Since it’s a big election year, we also take a look at the impact of editorial page endorsements.

FOR NEXT CLASS. READ: Review package and Edit package in Sakai.

**WEDNESDAY, October 21**

**Student Presentation**

**My Brilliant Reviews**

**We do an in-class exercise on editing. And we look at some great reviews, so we can talk about how you will tackle your next two writing projects!**

**YOUR FIRST REVIEW: Due Sunday, Oct. 25, at noon in Sakai.**

**MONDAY, October 26**

**Student Presentation**

**WORKSHOP FIRST REVIEW**

**FOR NEXT CLASS. READ: Reviewer package in Sakai.**

**WEDNESDAY, October 28**

**Student Presentation**

A Reviewer Reviews the Good, the Bad, the Ridiculous

GUEST SPEAKER

Did you send the instructor the memo on your review topic? Did you sign up for your final project consult?

Personal choice review due Sunday, Nov. 1, at noon in Sakai.

**MONDAY, November 2: NO CLASS… BUT…Final Project Review**

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

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

**WEDNESDAY, November 4**

**Post-Election Party!**

**WORKSHOP that final review. And let’s check in: What impact did editorial endorsements have?**

**FOR NEXT CLASS. READ: GROUP ONE FINAL in Sakai.**

**MONDAY, November 9**

**Workshop Final Project Group One**

FOR NEXT CLASS, READ: GROUP TWO FINAL in Sakai.

**WEDNESDAY, Nov. 10**

**Workshop Final Project Group Two**

FOR NEXT CLASS, READ: GROUP THREE FINAL in Sakai.

**MONDAY, November 16**

**Workshop Final Project Group Three**

**And enjoy the last lecture!**  
 **Your FINAL IS TENTATIVELY SCHEDULED FOR WEDNESDAY, Nov. 18, at 8 a.m. THAT IS WHEN YOUR FINAL PAPER IS DUE. We will meet in the Zoom room at that time and discuss final thoughts and celebrate the amazing work you have done.**