

# COMJ 451 Editorial Writing

## Spring 2009

**Credits:** 3

**Instructor:** Ms. Melinda Booze

**Office:** AB2 105F

**Class time:** T/R 8:30-9:45 a.m.

**Class Location:** T105-A

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**Office Hours:** As posted

**Course Description:** Principles and techniques of editorial and persuasive writing, including editorials and columns. Prerequisites: three communication courses (including COMM 214 and COMJ 314) or permission of professor.

### Textbooks

*The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual*

Sloan, Wm. David and Laird B. Anderson. *Pulitzer Prize Editorials: America's Best Writing 1917-2003*. Third Edition. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State Press (A Blackwell Publishing Company), 2003.

Woo, William. F. Meyer, Philip, editor. *Letters from the Editor: Lessons on Journalism and Life*. Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2007.

### Course Objectives

1. To develop the discipline of clear, analytical thinking as evidenced in clear, analytical, "value-added" opinion reporting & writing.
2. To analyze the overall opinion functions of the news media.
3. To gain an historical perspective of opinion reporting.
4. To understand how editorial policies are decided.
5. To develop skill in editorial and persuasive writing.
6. To become acquainted with the various forms of opinion writing.
7. To be aware of the varieties of print layouts possible for opinion pages.
8. To examine the online and broadcast delivery of opinion pieces.
9. To study the effects of graphics and cartoons on editorial delivery.
10. To be aware of the legal and ethical aspects of opinion writing.

### Course Methodology

Conrad Fink, author of *Writing Opinion for Impact*, a textbook I have previously used for this class, says in his Editorial Writing and Issues class syllabus, "As an opinion writing in the media today, you can do more good than a battalion of Red Cross volunteers. You can also do more harm than a bomb-throwing terrorist on a crowded street corner."

A credible, balanced and passionate analysis and opinion is a powerful change agent. A weak, ill-informed and defensive analysis and opinion is a waste of everyone's time.

Here's what we—o.k., mostly you, since I have no shortage of soapboxes upon which to debate and opine—are going to do:

- Read newspapers and magazines and listen to and watch newscasts and radio commentary to follow issues in the campus, local, national and international news. To be an opinion reporter, you must be aware of and conversant about the compelling social, economic and political issues of the day.
- Be prepared to discuss in class what the above compelling issues are on any given day.

- Focus your passion on the topics that move you to take a position that you will stake and defend without equivocation.
- Write editorials and commentary for print and broadcast that have the SEA factor: they Stimulate, Explain and Advocate.
- Avoid submitting uninformed, unreported opinions either in discussion or writing. You must have a grasp on the details, on diverse perspectives and the complexities of the problems and solutions in today's world.
- Propose solutions to the problems, rather than just shaking your finger with indignant piousness at the issues. Beyond the mechanics and structure, editorial and opinion writing reflects solid reporting, clear thinking, fair analysis and strong advocacy.
- Do ADDED-VALUE reporting for your opinion pieces; you will not just re-hash the five Ws and one H the reader or listener already knows.

The syllabus is an outline that we will follow with flexibility. Therefore, your attendance is mandatory. Your presence in class is a must for learning the principles, as there is no traditional textbook. Discussions are incomplete without every person's contribution.

In summary, you will

Be thoroughly informed about compelling current issues.

Discuss and debate with your colleagues.

Learn the history/purpose/principles of opinion reporting during class sessions.

Analyze, report and write; analyze, report and write; analyze, report and write—with some peer critique along the way.

### **Class Sessions**

- Almost every class will include lecture on the principles and practices of opinion reporting.
- Most classes will include dialogue, discourse and deliberation in your exchange of ideas. Please comment openly and freely on the topics in play, as well as on the comments of other class members. You will not always agree with each other, and I want you to represent your point of view. Everyone should contribute to creating a safe but lively environment for all perspectives. You may disagree and say so, but do so diplomatically, in good taste and free of *ad hominem* arguments. (See handout.) The goal is for all of us to improve our understanding of the issues and the complexities surrounding those issues. The Bible speaks of iron sharpening iron—we are here to strengthen one another in our thinking, our writing and our communication.
- Your analysis of media coverage will be part of many class sessions, as well.
- There will be some in-class assignments.
- Attendance will be taken at the beginning of class each day; if you arrive late, check with me after class about your recorded attendance for that class session. Students may not receive attendance credit, if arrival to class is consistently or significantly late. Chronic absence will make a significant, negative difference in your class grade.

### **Assignments**

Assignments must be ON TIME at the beginning of class period. No assignments will be accepted late. Absence is not an excuse for a late assignment.

For each written assignment completed outside of class, submit TWO printed, double-spaced, properly formatted copies. A Turn-it-In drop box on Angel will be the official submission.

Editorials for which documentation and research have been used **MUST** be submitted with photocopies of research materials, including the complete bibliographic information in proper MLA or APA format.

**WORD COUNTS** must be included at the end of each assignment.

In addition to writing assignments, there will be

- research assignments
- evaluation assignments
- group assignments
- other assignments as pertinent

Proofread! Follow AP style. Use correct grammar and sentence structure. Use accurate vocabulary. Avoid the Department of Redundancy Department. Follow the printing format that I provide.

Opinion Writing is **REPORTED** writing, but there is flexibility in the structure; in other words, you will not always need to get the five Ws and one H in the inverted pyramid lead.

Plagiarism or academic dishonesty of any kind will not be tolerated. Detected academic dishonesty will automatically result in a failing grade for the project and a notice to the student affairs committee, as per Evangel's policy. A pattern of academic dishonesty will result in an F for the class.

Quizzes, which may or may not be announced, may be given periodically. Quizzes and other in-class activities cannot be made up except as noted in the university's attendance policy as relating to school-approved absences.

#### **Evaluation criteria for letter grades**

- Excellent or A

Professional quality work. An insightful, relevant, newsworthy subject. The editorial fulfills a legitimate editorial purpose. The editorial involves the reader in its drama, humor, ethos or pathos. Technique is flawless with perfect content, organization and mechanics. Information supporting the editorial argument is complete and accurate. Wording is precise. The writing explores the topic at different levels and does not simply make the same point from different perspectives. Publishable and distinguished.

- Good or B

Competent, functional opinion essay. Journeyman journalism. Publishable. Clean copy that makes a significant point efficiently in support of the argument set forth. Appropriate expression of active, believable circumstances or facts in support of the editorial as it fulfills and editorial purpose. Details are thorough and accurate. Writing mechanics and organizational technique are of a high order. The editorial point of view is balanced.

- Acceptable or C

Average, run-of-the-mill editorial writing. Probably publishable, but undistinguished. Properly written, but the content is average quality that may or may not be publishable. The editorial weakly fulfills a legitimate purpose but offers little true insight into the subject. Content is adequate to identify the subject, but poorly organized. Mechanics are good.

- Poor or D

Unpublishable work. A combination of flaws in conceptualizing, researching, organizing and writing render the work unsatisfactory. This is work, which with better planning and good effort,

might have been publishable.

- Unacceptable or F

Not publishable. Decidedly unprofessional. Weaknesses in journalistic thinking, editorial writing technique, and/or professionalism have resulted in a failure on this assignment. Inaccuracies and other content errors, poor mechanics, unpublishable organization, and/or missed deadlines have reduced the assignment to failure.

*(Letter grade criteria adapted from "Editorial Writing" syllabus, Dr. Anthony Curtis, University of North Carolina at Pembroke.)*

### **Tests**

We will not have a traditional mid-term or final test. There will be presentations and/or in-depth assignments for mid-term and final evaluation.

### **Quizzes**

Quizzes will generally be announced, unless there is a need to motivate students to stay current on issues, be better prepared for class discussions or to keep up with reading.

### **Grading**

All writing assignments will be graded in these three broad categories: Contents, Organization, Mechanics (which includes AP style).

Some assignments will receive a point total; some a letter grade. The final grade will be based on a point total. (I will convert the letter grades to points in calculating final grades.) The standard percentage scale for grading, with plusses and minuses, will be used.

### **Attendance**

Regular class attendance is necessary to be successful in this class. Remember, there are no "excused" absences. If you know you will miss class for school-sponsored activities, plan those into your absence total. Remind me BEFORE you must miss class for an acceptable reason, and turn in completed assignments ahead of time.

### **Cell phones**

There are few things more disrespectful than responding to your cell phone in the midst of class. Turn them off and put them away.

1. In your Senior Seminar class, if not before, you will be putting together your portfolio in preparation for looking for a job. This class will result in several potential portfolio pieces/clips. I recommend that you save your revised work for your portfolio.
2. Re-purposing Assignments: In some instances, it may be appropriate for you to use some work you have done for other class assignments. If you think this is a possibility for any assignments in this class, you **MUST** discuss the previous work with me and have a clear plan for building upon or adding class-specific work to the previous assignment. You may **NOT** use previous assignments if those assignments were team assignments. If you do not receive my approval to use previous assignments, you will receive no credit for assignments re-purposed for this class.
3. Attendance is necessary. This class is preparing you for responsibilities in a professional setting where deadlines rule. There are **NO EXCUSED ABSENCES** and **NO MAKE-UP ASSIGNMENTS**. If you are in a traveling group, on a sports team, or know of other necessary absences, you should count these in your total allowed cuts. Chronic tardiness is disrespectful and symptomatic of immaturity. Please know the University attendance policy and follow it. Poor attendance habits will be reflected in your final grade.
4. Throughout the course of the semester, the assignments and schedule on this syllabus may change as needed at the discretion of the instructor.
5. Faculty may require students who are in violation of the dress code to leave class and return in appropriate attire. In such cases a tardy or absence may be assessed at the discretion of the faculty.
6. Academic dishonesty (i.e. cheating in any form) will not be tolerated. This includes “sharing” information. All work must be your original work. Any detected cheating will result in a failing grade for that assignment and could result in a failing grade for the course. Become acquainted with the policy on academic dishonesty in the *Student Handbook*.
7. E-mail Communication Systems: E-mail is to be the principal means of communication between faculty, staff, administration and students. Types of communication may include assignments, registration materials, announcements, etc. It is the responsibility of the student to check his/her Evangel University E-mail account daily, and the student will be held accountable for any and all official communication of administrative policies, faculty instructions and campus information sent via the Evangel E-mail system. Mass E-mail distributions should be utilized only for critical information.
8. It is university policy to provide reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities. If you would like to request accommodations due to a physical, mental, or learning disability, please contact your instructor and the Academic and Career Development Dept., Student Union, Suite 107.

**This schedule of topics & assignments is subject to change at the discretion of the instructor.**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Class Topic</b>	<b>Assignment</b>	<b>Due</b>
1/8/09	Course Overview		
1/13 T	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is opinion/editorial reporting?</li> <li>• What is its role?</li> <li>• What is the tradition &amp; history?</li> <li>• Whence the Victorian “We”?</li> </ul>		
1/15	Ethics & Responsibilities Legalities & Libel		
1/20 T	Identifying Topics Localizing for a Specific Audience		
1/22	Reporting/Researching		
1/27 T	Newspaper Editorials Letters to the Editor		
1/29	Editorial Structure Editorial Boards		
2/3 T	Campus Editorials (Assn. Grp. 1)		
2/5	Online & Broadcast (Assn. Boards)		
2/10 T	Blogs/Citizen Journalism Interaction & Comments		
2/12	Peer Critiques		
2/17 T	Difficult Topics		
2/19	Deceptively Easy Topics		
2/24 T	Campus Editorials (Assn. Grp. 2)		
2/26	Commentary & Columns		
3/3	<b>SPRING BREAK</b>		
3/5	<b>SPRING BREAK</b>		
3/10 T	Arts Criticism		
3/12	Election Endorsements		
3/17 T	Cartoons & Humor		
3/19	Sports Commentary		
3/24 T	Tribute Editorials		
3/26			
3/31 T	In-Depth Editorials; Editorial Series		
4/2			
4/7 T	Op-Eds		
4/9	Design & Presentation		
4/14 T	Topic Analysis Projects presented		
4/16	Opinion Reporting in the Midst of Mass Media Transition		
4/21 T			
4/23	<b>Begin Final Presentations</b>		<b>Presentations</b>
<b>4/28 T</b>	<b>Final Presentations concluded</b>		7:30-9:30 a.m.

