

OPINION WRITING/REPORTING

JOUR 4190-001

SPRING 2025

CLASS MEETINGS: Tuesday and Thursday 9:40-11:05 am

MEEMAN 208

Prof. Tonyaa Weathersbee

Office Hours: Five hours a week by appointment

Email: tjwthrsb@memphis.edu

Office Phone: 901-678-3484

Email: tjwthrsb@memphis.edu

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Catalog description

Principles and practices for well-researched and well-written editorials, columns, op-ed submissions, reviews, broadcast commentaries and long form analysis/perspective pieces; thorough examination of the purpose and impact of opinion journalism on readers, viewers, listeners, political leaders, policy makers and society at large.

Prerequisites

JOUR 3526, 3120 or JOUR 3629

Textbooks, Software and Required Materials

REQUIRED

- Suzette Martinez Strandring, "The Art of Opinion Writing: Insider Secrets from Top Op-Ed Columnists," (RRP International LLC, 2013) ISBN 978-0989884860. May also be purchased on Kindle.
- Read various opinion columns and editorials distributed by the instructor, as well as editorials in The Commercial Appeal, the Daily Memphian and MLK 50.

RECOMMENDED

- Read editorials in the daily and Sunday Viewpoint sections of The Washington Post, The New York Times, the Philadelphia Enquirer and The Wall Street Journal.
- Occasionally view Otis Sanford's daily television commentary on ABC24 News at 5 p.m. weekdays.

Classroom format

This course is designed to develop writing, reporting, and professional skills specific to opinion journalism. Students will learn about writing and reporting strategies and how to properly form opinions and conclusions for content produced in print, Web, social media, audio, and video. Further, we will discuss opportunities for shorter form opinion journalism on television and radio. A typical class session will consist of a lecture, discussion, and in-class writing. Most sessions will be set up to resemble a news organization's editorial board meeting, and students must

come ready to discuss important public issues and be prepared to write editorials on those issues. Students are also required to complete multiple writing exercises throughout the semester, as well as a final project.

Accessing the course website

1. Go to the University of Memphis online learning home page: <http://memphis.instructure.com>
2. Log in using your University of Memphis username and password.
3. In the term year course list available to you, click on the link for JOUR 4190-001 to enter your course and read the instructions on the welcoming page.
4. Use your regular University of Memphis email to correspond with me at tjwthrsb@memphis.edu.

Course Requirements

Students must attend each class session because writing assignments will be required during many class meetings. Students also will be required to write up to five or more opinion pieces outside of class on major political, social or public policy issues. Each assignment must be accompanied by one of the following multi-media components: Infographic, photograph, photo slideshow, video, audio or podcast. Students will also be assigned a final project which will consist of a long-form analysis or perspective piece on a topic of public interest. It also must include a multi-media component. All outside assignments are to be submitted electronically via Canvas. LATE WORK WILL RESULT IN A LETTER DROP ON GRADE.

Grading

In-class writing assignments: 50 percent

Final project: 50 percent

A+ = 96.5-100%; A = 92.5-96.4%; A- = 89.5-92.4%
B+ = 86.5-89.4%; B = 82.5-86.4%; B- = 79.5-82.4%
C+ = 76.5-79.4%; C = 72.5-76.4%; C- = 69.5-72.4%
D+ = 66.5-69.4%; D = 59.5-66.4%
F 0-59.4%

Other issues

There will tentatively be several guest speakers during the semester assuming schedules can be worked out, and students will be required to write opinion pieces based on some of those interviews. There will also be sessions in which video of meetings will be watched, and students will be required to write opinion pieces based on those meetings

Course Schedule

TENTATIVE TIMETABLE

Note: What follows is a tentative schedule. The syllabus is a general plan for the course; and the instructor reserves the right to make changes as the semester progresses. If there are any changes, you will of course be notified in a timely manner.

Week 1

Jan. 21: Introductions and expectations for the semester. Discussion of why students are enrolled in the class and what they hope to learn and gain. History of opinion writing and why it differs from straight reporting.

Jan. 23: Discussion of columns in the Stranding book. Discussion of current events and the role that opinion writing plays in distilling the meaning of reported facts. First outside assignment analyzing whether the Memphis Shelby County School Board should terminate the contract of its new superintendent, Marie Feagins. Assignment due Jan. 30.

Week 2

Jan. 28: A detailed discussion of opinion writing, from editorials to columns, to perspectives, to broadcast commentaries to reviews and analytical think pieces. Qualifications for professional opinion writing. Why does opinion journalism remain relevant?

Jan. 30: Lecture and In-class exercise analyzing various opinion pieces. First outside assignment due.

Week 3

Feb. 4: Why do editorial boards exist? Who sits on the board? What are their qualifications? Why is diversity in all its forms important? What is happening to editorial boards at newspapers around the country? Review national editorials and columns on the 2024 election, Trump's win and controversy over his Cabinet nominations for Feb. 6 class – and find a topic upon which to write an opinion.

Feb. 6: Class editorial discussions on readings. Writing editorials in class. Review required and recommended readings, as well as current events, for editorial discussion in class Feb.11.

Week 4

Feb. 11: Class editorial discussion on various topics presented by students. Assignment of second out of class opinion piece due Feb. 18. In-class editorial writing exercise. Students must come to class with a topic.

Feb. 13: Special guest opinion journalist or newsmaker.

Week 5

Feb. 18: Second outside opinion piece due. Discussion on writing commentary for television/radio broadcast.

Feb. 20: Discussion of podcasts and other emerging forms of opinion journalism. Review of outside opinion pieces.

Week 6

Feb. 25: Students must bring idea to class for short form broadcast commentary. In-class writing assignment suitable for broadcast commentary. Students will then be required outside of class to produce short audio version of that commentary. Assignment due March 4.

Feb. 27: Lecture on the role style and prose plays in effective opinion and commentary writing. In-class analysis of commentary that reflects that.

Week 7

March 4: Discussion of book reviews and how to write an effective one. Outside audio assignment due.

March 6: Guest appearance by newsmaker.

Week 8 SPRING BREAK

March 11: No class

March 13: No class

Week 9

March 18: The do's and don'ts of opinion writing on social media.

March 19: In class discussion assessment of the first half of the semester. Discussion of major editorial topic in the news. In class editorial writing assignment.

Week 10

March 24: Discussion of personal experiences and the role they play in shaping opinion writing and commentary. Assignment on personal experience commentary due April 1

March 25: The importance of diversity in opinion and commentary writing. Analysis of how diverse writers approached a particular topic and the insight it added.

Week 11

April 1: Personal experience commentaries due. Discussion of commentaries.

April 3: Guest appearance via Teams of renowned columnist. In-class exercise.

Week 12

April 8: Lecture, discussion of modern challenges to editorial and commentary writing.

April 10: Lecture, in-class exercise.

Week 13

April 15: Lecture; discussion of modern challenges to editorial and commentary writing.

April 17: Lecture; discussion of current event for in-class exercise opinion piece.

Week 14

April 22: Guest speaker via Teams; lecture.

April 24: Guest speaker via Teams; lecture.

Week 15:

April 29: Lecture; review and discussion of final projects.

May 1: Lecture; review and discussion of final projects.

Week 16:

May 6: Review and discussion of final projects.

May 8: Final projects due.

Assessment and Outcomes

Professional Values and Competencies in JOUR 4190-001

- Understand and apply the principles and laws of freedom of speech and press, for the country in which the institution that invites ACEJMC is located, as well as receive instruction in and understand the range of systems of freedom of expression around the world, including the right to dissent, to monitor and criticize power, and to assemble and petition for redress of grievances
- Demonstrate an understanding of the history and role of professionals and institutions in shaping communications
- Demonstrate an understanding of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and,

as appropriate, other forms of diversity in domestic society in relation to mass communications

- Demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of peoples and cultures and of the significance and impact of mass communications in a global society
- Demonstrate an understanding of professional ethical principles and work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity
- Think critically, creatively and independently
- Conduct research and evaluate information by methods appropriate to the communications professions in which they work
- Write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communications professions, audiences and purposes they serve
- Critically evaluate their own work and that of others for accuracy and fairness, clarity, appropriate style and grammatical correctness
- Apply tools and technologies appropriate for the communications professions in which they work, and to understand the digital world

How professional values and competencies will be met

Cognitive objectives to be mastered (ability to explain, analyze, understand, think critically)

- Recognize the role of media in influencing the political, cultural and public policy dynamics locally, regionally, nationally and globally.
- Stay up-to-date on the various opinions from some of the leading media outlets including *The Commercial Appeal*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Politico* and broadcast outlets such as NPR, PBS, MSNBC, Fox News and CNN.
- Develop a strong historical sense of how mass communication technologies originated and developed, and how 21st Century technology can be used to impact public opinion.
- Understand the variety of relationships between media and their audiences, including diverse audiences.
- Understand that strong journalistic opinions need not be mean-spirited and insulting.
- Understand that good writing is the backbone of any successful commentary.
- Understand the critical need for thorough reporting and research in order to write opinion pieces and produce broadcast commentaries that are persuasive and effective.
- Be sensitive to the needs of diverse and under-represented groups in presenting commentary and creating messages.
- Understand the history of news editorials and the role they played in shaping public opinion and holding policy makers accountable.
- Understand the changing landscape of opinion journalism and why it is relevant in today's mass media world.
- Understand the ongoing government regulation of the U.S. media as well as the constitutional principles that guide it.
- Recognize the ethical and philosophical issues that arise in media culture and understand the range of viewpoints regarding these issues.
- Understand the behind-the-scenes operations and decision-making processes of major mass communication industries.

- Understand how new technology affects the media and communication.
- Understand what's involved in preparing for and advancing a career in the changing media.
- Understand the allied fields of advertising and public relations and their relationship to media systems.
- Understand mass communication theories and their application to media professions.

Performance standards to be met (demonstrable skills, abilities, techniques, applied competencies)

- Earn a passing score on all writing assignments.
- Write with clarity, accuracy and authoritativeness.
- Interview newsmakers who come to class and write an opinion piece based on the meeting.
- Make strong arguments for your position on certain topics and try to convince others in the class to change their stance.

How assessment of student learning will be met

Awareness

- Students increase awareness through lectures, required reading and discussion of the purpose of opinion writing and the techniques necessary to produce quality commentary.
- Students gain knowledge of issues generating editorials, columns and broadcast commentaries.
- Students gain an awareness of diversity in all its forms and how it applies to all areas of mass communication.
- Ethical decision-making is discussed throughout the semester as it applies to opinion writing.
- Discussion questions will be posed in class to stimulate critical thinking. Independent thinking and critical analysis are encouraged.

Understanding

- Students learn the difference between objective news reporting and commentary. Students also learn the various ways that opinion journalism is utilized in today's media environment.
- Students critically analyze various forms of opinion journalism and offer input during class discussions.

Application

- Students demonstrate an understanding of the guiding principles for opinion writing by producing content that adheres to those principles.
- Students work together on a final product using podcasting to produce opinion content.

JOURNALISM AND STRATEGIC MEDIA POLICIES

Portfolio requirement

As an undergraduate student in the Department of Journalism and Strategic Media, you are required to develop and maintain an active portfolio of your work. Portfolios begin in JRSM 3900/3905. The portfolio should contain samples of coursework and/or professional experiences and should develop as you build skills. Portfolios will undergo a final, external review while you are enrolled in your capstone course.

You may use any type of web hosting for your portfolio, but it must have an independent and professional URL. You may use any content management system, but you are encouraged to use WordPress, Wix, or SquareSpace. It is also encouraged to purchase a URL if you plan to use the portfolio long term. You must keep the portfolio active for six months following graduation from the University of Memphis.

You should have a professional email address you plan to use throughout your professional life, via a common email service, such as Gmail.

All portfolios must contain the following items:

Samples of work from courses and/or professional activities. (Example: Broadcasting students must include a video reel)

- A current résumé
- A personal profile
- Contact information/means of contact
- Professional social media links (minimum LinkedIn)

You may wish to include a blog, video reels, photograph galleries, presentations, design PDFs, audio files or writing pieces as examples of professional work. The professional work should ultimately be tailored to the career you seek after graduation. Your portfolio should show a unique blend of work.

Email

You must have your UofM email account activated. If you are using another provider, such as Google, you are required to have all UofM emails forwarded to that account. Go to the account management website for information about implementing email forwarding. You are required to check your email daily.

Electronic devices

Some classes require a tablet, laptop or a smartphone. Others do not. Instructors will set the policy for their specific classes.

AI/Chat GPT

The use of artificial intelligence software, such as Chat GPT, is prohibited in some courses and required in others in Journalism & Strategic Media. Please refer to specific guidelines for this course in the course-specific part of the syllabus.

Attendance

Class attendance is mandatory in Journalism & Strategic Media. You may be assigned a failing grade for the semester for nonattendance or habitual tardiness. Here's how attendance works: You get three free passes during the semester. After you cash in the passes, missed classes are reflected in your final grade. For example, if you miss one additional class, your final grade drops a letter grade. If you miss two more classes, your grade drops again. So, if you miss six classes, your final grade drops two letters.

Course repetition

Majors and minors who fail to earn the minimum passing grade (C-) in a class required by your program of study in Journalism & Strategic Media after three attempts will be dropped from the program.

You may not use or submit work from a previous course, even if it is the same course being repeated, to fulfill requirements for assignments in another course. Substantially reworking the original submission, or working with the same general idea, may be permissible upon discussion and with written approval from the professor of the current course.

Academic integrity

The University of Memphis expects all students to behave honestly and follow the policies stated in the Student Code of Rights and Responsibilities. If you need more information about the University policy on academic integrity visit the Office of Student Accountability's website.

In addition to University-wide policies, the Department of Journalism & Strategic Media considers making up quotes from sources, turning in substantially the same assignment for credit in two different courses or receiving any assistance from others for work assigned to be done on your own, as acts of cheating and punishable to the degree determined appropriate by the course instructor and department chair.

Punishment may include grade reductions or seeking dismissal of the student from the University. Further, you are expected to comply with copyright and intellectual property laws and must have sufficient permission to use any copyrighted materials used in creative projects, unless otherwise informed in cases of exercises or reproduction.

Your written work may be submitted to Turnitin.com, or a similar electronic detection method, for rating originality of your ideas and to evaluate proper use and assignment of sources. All creative work may be checked for policy adherence by the professor. The only exception to this policy is your online portfolio and its attendant pieces (for example, the résumé and logo). By taking this course, you agree that all assignments may undergo this review process. The assignment may be included as a source document in Turnitin.com's restricted access database. It is solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism in such documents. Assignments not submitted according to the instructor's procedures may be penalized or may not be accepted at all.

Online SETEs

You are encouraged to complete the SETEs evaluation of this course. If completed, once the instructor has posted final grades, you can immediately see that grade. To access evaluation forms, log in to MyMemphis; click the "Student Pages" dropdown menu and select "My Resources" and find the SETE evaluation forms; complete an evaluation for each course listed and hit the "Submit" button at the bottom of the form. Completing the SETE will only take a few minutes. Faculty take the evaluations seriously and use them to improve courses and instructional quality. Your feedback is essential and is appreciated.

Deadlines

All deadlines are firm. Because Journalism & Strategic Media is a professional program, students are expected to understand and comply with deadlines. Students needing an extension on an assignment must receive approval from the instructor. Exceptions will be made for reasonable circumstances if the student notifies the instructor prior to the due date.

You may be permitted to make up missing work if it is for an absence because of illness or other catastrophic emergency, such as a death in the family that can be documented.

AP Style and grammar

All written work in this class must follow the AP Stylebook and accepted rules of grammar and punctuation. You are responsible for learning these rules and checking your work for errors.

Disability and accommodations

If you need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability, contact Disability Resources for Students at 901-678-2880 in 110 Wilder Tower Hall to coordinate reasonable accommodations.

Diversity and Inclusivity

The Department of Journalism & Strategic Media values diversity in all its forms. Some of these forms include ability, age, appearance, ethnicity, gender identity, immigration status, language, nationality, race, religion/spirituality, sex, sexuality, socio-economic status, and other personal identities and experiences. As such, students are expected to participate in fostering an inclusive environment that respects the differences of others.

Students are expected to approach their work through a diverse lens. Creating messages that resonate with diverse audiences requires an understanding of a variety of perspectives, which are carried out through multiple platforms, such as digital and traditional media outlets.

The department seeks to foster healthy and positive classroom discussions and experiences. As such, faculty and students are expected to remain respectful and professional.

Weather policy

Always check with local media, the University of Memphis website and the LiveSafe App regarding inclement weather.

Student support

If you are experiencing personal or academic challenges including, but not limited to food or housing issues, family needs, or other stressors, visit the Student Outreach & Support page to learn about resources that can help: <https://www.memphis.edu/deanofstudents/crisis/index.php> or contact the Dean of Students Office at 901-678-2187, or in person in Suite 359 in the University Center for assistance. You may also talk with course instructors about the challenges you are experiencing. Instructors may be able to assist in connecting you with campus or community support.