

J404: Interpretation of Contemporary Affairs

2:30-3:45pm, Vilas 5157

Fall 2014

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Office Hours

1:15-2:15pm, Monday

And by appointment

Rathskeller Hours

12:30-1:30pm, Thursday

I knew I'd found the perfect job for myself. As a columnist I could pick my own topic, do my own analysis, say what I wanted to say and attribute it to myself. Best of all, I could write in my own voice.

Allan Sloan

Perhaps more than any other person or group who communicates to the mass public, news commentators influence public opinion. The best columnists offer original, thought-provoking, accurate, insightful, rigorously researched, and clear arguments about contemporary issues. In this course, you will learn:

- How to develop your own distinctive voice as you produce weekly opinion columns
- Strategies to figure out what to write about
- How to respond to editorial feedback
- Skills that help you present your opinion writing in multiple platforms
- How to write a news analysis
- How to engage another opinion leader in mediated conversation

Important Deadlines

Columns: Each Monday, you will turn in a column. If you do not turn it in as a hard copy at the beginning of class, it will not be accepted. Columns should be 700-800 words long. On three occasions of your choosing, you are to turn in a revision of a previously graded column, having responded to the feedback you received.

News Analysis: Due Oct. 15 and Nov. 3. News analyses should be about 1,500 words. They must include quotes from at least two interviews.

Rebuke: Due Dec. 3. The rebuke should be 800-1,000 words.

Web: Your Wordpress site and your contributions on Twitter (course hashtag #J404) are “rolling deadlines” though for the purposes of class you must write and post one original opinion piece (re: not a column, news analysis, or rebuke) of a length of your choosing to your Wordpress page by Friday at 5:00pm every other week.

- These could be about politics, movies, music, sports, society, television, religion, education, business, Madison, UW, etc.
- These should be much shorter, typically, than columns.
 - These should include hyperlinks to relevant materials.
- Of course, on occasion, you may “go off” and write a very long piece.
- At least once, your post must be a video. That video must contain at least 30 seconds of you talking directly to the camera and can include sound bites, “b-roll,” etc.
- You must also post your weekly columns and news analyses to your Wordpress site each week.

Grades

Attendance, Participation, Reviewing Colleagues' Work: (10%)

Columns (50%)

News Analyses (15%)

Rebuke (10%)

Web (15%)

A=94-100 B=82-86.9 C=70-76.9 F=59.9 and below

AB=87-93.9 BC=77-81.9 D=60-69.9

Rounding up is not automatic, but based on attendance, office hour visits, and improvement.

Grades, the syllabus, the readings, and assignments are available on Learn@UW.

Attendance/Participation

Your participation grade will be based on participation in class, your reviews of your colleagues' work and the caliber (not amount!) of your regular participation discussions. If you have any questions about how you are doing, please see me, though keep in mind that I will regularly update your participation grade on Learn@UW so that you can see where you stand. Part of your grade will be determined by how well you are keeping up with current columnists' work. Current columnists include, but are not limited to those in *The New York Times*, *The Wisconsin State Journal*, *The Capital Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Additionally, I understand that everyone is not comfortable participating in class. On the one hand, college is a time for you to try new things; so I want you to try to participate. On the other hand, for some, this just isn't possible or productive. If you might fit this latter category, you must come see me by the end of the 1st week of classes to discuss alternate ways you can participate.

***Grading Policy for Exams and Written Assignments

Should you have a question about how something was scored and would like me to reconsider your grade, you may proceed as follows: 1) After waiting a minimum of 24 hours from the time you get your paper or exam back, inform me in writing about your specific questions and claims about why you think you were incorrectly evaluated; 2) after I read your argument, we will meet and discuss it; 3) if our meeting did not produce a satisfactory result, inform me that you would like to dispute the score I gave you; 4) I will give the assignment to another professor in the department; whatever score he or she gives you is final, whether it is higher or lower than the original. I will not tell the second grader your original score.

Assignments

Columns (13, 10 original, 3 revised)

Rebuke (1)

News Analyses (2)

Digital Work (Bi-Weekly)

Academic Dishonesty/Civilities

Integrity is important. Please take note of the university's policy on academic misconduct:

<http://students.wisc.edu/doso/acadintegrity.html>. If you have questions about how to properly cite a source, the quality of a particular source, and the like, I will help you with gusto and vigor. Any student caught

plagiarizing or cheating will receive an F for the assignment and possibly the course. I reserve the right to report any incident to the Dean.

Since we are discussing politics, entertainment and our own ideas in this class, it is possible that some emotions could run high. It is very important to treat everyone in class with dignity and respect. That does not mean that you have to accept every argument someone (including me!) makes, but it does mean that your response to that argument will not be personal and will be polite. While I am confident that this won't be a problem, failure to follow these guidelines will impact your participation grade by 10% per inappropriate outburst. I won't be using my cell phone to make calls or text during class. Neither will you. I won't use my computer to surf the web during class or update my Facebook status or Twitter feed. Neither will you. If I break these rules, you can have my phone and my computer. If you break these rules, I can have your phone and/or laptop.

Some Advice

There are many positive strategies you can employ in order to leave this class with the ability to write excellent columns and news analyses in a digital media environment (not to mention a good grade). One of the most important is coming to office hours and Rathskeller hours. I want all of you to use this class to become alert and critical thinkers. I also would like to a little bit about you, what you are interested in, and what your goals are at UW and beyond. Coming to office hours/Rath hours to talk with me about your work, what you like about class, what you don't, and anything else are all great ways to maximize your experience here.

If you want to skip class, take a different one. A great deal of what you will learn at the University of Wisconsin won't come from a book, but from the lectures, multi-media examples, and discussions you experience in class. Skipping class will not teach you what you need to know about communication and opinion, even if you manage to pass the tests.

If you must miss for a legitimate reason, you must let me know before class in every imaginable circumstance. You have at least three ways to get ahold of me (email, office phone, Twitter). I am happy to work with you if you do this. If you have a personal condition that might result in your missing class or turning in assignments late, please alert me to it prior to **September 10th** so we can make any necessary adjustments to help you succeed.

Late Work

Late Work is not accepted. You may drop your lowest graded column from the final grade calculations provided that you turned every assignment in on time.

Course Schedule: Readings, Assignments, Exams

For each day, except the first day, be sure to have read the assigned reading for that class before you come!

September 3	Welcome! Read: Syllabus
September 8	Getting Started Read: How to write an opinion piece and why you should do it now DUE: Mission Statement
September 10	Pulitzer Winners Read: Stephen Henderson's October and December columns
September 15	Getting Good Ideas Read: Smells like school spirit Obama's herky-jerky foreign policy DUE: Column
September 17	Using the Academy I: Data Commentary and Prediction Read: Using economic projections to make vote projections How political science conquered Washington
September 22	Using the Academy II: Explanation Read: The center cannot hold Ezra Klein gives political scientists some of their own medicine DUE: Column
September 24	Taking a Strong Position Read: The tribe should retire chief wahoo
September 29	Endorsing Read: Barack Obama for re-election Why we won't make endorsements DUE: Column
October 1	Television Criticism Read: AMC's Mad Men: a bunch of cutthroats without an edge
October 6	Movie Criticism Read: 7 of Roger Ebert's most brutal reviews DUE: Column
October 8	Political Column Writing Read: Kevin rubs it in

October 13 Long Form: Cultural/Political
Read: [The case for reparations](#)
DUE: Column

October 15 Long Form: Sports
Read: [Dear diary...who are these](#)
DUE: News Analysis

October 20 History in Columns
Read: [Centrist, and not yet unified](#)
DUE: Column

October 22 Thematic Writing
Read: [Behind the rise of sex-scandal tarred politicians](#)

October 27 What's New
Read: Young Scholar's Choice 1
DUE: Column

October 29 What's New
Read: Young Scholar's Choice 2

November 1 What's New
Read: Young Scholar's Choice 3
DUE: Column

November 3 What's New
Read: Young Scholar's Choice 4
DUE: News Analysis

November 10 What's New
Read: Young Scholar's Choice 5
DUE: Column

November 12 What's New
Read: Young Scholar's Choice 6

November 17 What's New
Read: Young Scholar's Choice 7
DUE: Column

November 19 What's New
Read: Young Scholar's Choice 8

November 24 What's New
Read: Wagner's Choice
DUE: Column

November 26	NO CLASS, Individual Meetings
December 1	Collegial Feedback DUE: Column
December 3	Collegial Feedback DUE: Rebuke
December 8	Wrap-Up DUE: Column
December 10	Epilogue