

9-2009

## JOUR 489.01: Opinion Writing

Steve Woodruff

*University of Montana - Missoula*

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/syllabi>

---

### Recommended Citation

Woodruff, Steve, "JOUR 489.01: Opinion Writing" (2009). *Syllabi*. 1232.  
<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/syllabi/1232>

This Syllabus is brought to you for free and open access by the Course Syllabi at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Syllabi by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).

**JOURNALISM 489**

**Opinion Writing**

3 credits

2:10-3 p.m. Monday, Wednesday and Friday

Don Anderson Hall, Room 210

Adjunct Professor Steve Woodruff

E-mail: [steve.woodruff@umontana.edu](mailto:steve.woodruff@umontana.edu)

Phone: 531-5019

Office: 402 DAH

Office hours: 3-4:30 p.m Mondays and Wednesdays

**Course description**

This course explores several forms of persuasive journalism: editorials, criticism, op-ed columns and personal columns. Course work emphasizes thorough reporting, critical thinking and sound argumentation along with effective, stylish writing adaptable to any medium. Class sessions include extensive discussion of professional practices, sophisticated writing techniques, ethics, legal issues and moderating opinion forums. Prerequisite: JOUR 331 or instructor's permission.

**Outcomes**

Successful students will emerge from Journalism 489 with:

- Experience writing editorials, columns and reviews.
- The ability to build strong arguments and recognize and counter logical fallacies.
- Improved analytical and writing skills contributing to good opinion writing – skills applicable to all types of writing.
- The ability to blend logic, passion and personality in writing readers find compelling.
- An appreciation of the societal value of commentary and the growing economic opportunity for skilled commentators in the evolving media marketplace.
- An understanding of ways audiences form opinions and how experts can influence and sometimes manipulate public opinion.
- An appreciation of the ethical considerations related to journalists' use and misuse of the powers of persuasion.
- The ability to recognize the boundary separating constitutionally protected opinion from legally actionable defamation.
- An understanding of current media practices related to commentary and the ways those practices are evolving.

## Course policies

**Classroom discussion is an essential part of this course.** To succeed, you must attend and actively participate in class. Meaningful participation includes reading assigned articles and completing other assigned homework before each class. Class discussions may become spirited but must remain respectful and constructive. The extent and quality of your class participation and completion of routine class assignments will affect your grade.

**Required reading.** This course does not rely on a textbook. You will read an extensive collection of articles provided as classroom handouts or available online. Assigned readings, podcasts and videos are detailed in this syllabus. Expect additional assigned reading in the form of printed or online examples of commentary.

**All writing for this class must be original.** As stated in the University of Montana Student Conduct Code, you may not submit for this course any assignment that has previously or will be concurrently submitted for another class unless you receive prior approval from the professor for this course. To do so without permission will result in an F for the assignment and could result in an F for the course. You may not recycle pieces previously written for publication. You may, however, incorporate into opinion pieces written for this class reporting done for other classes or purposes if the professors of the other classes consent. You must be able to identify the sources of all information you use.

**University policy regarding academic honesty:** All students must practice academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or a disciplinary sanction by the University. All students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code. The Code is available for review online at [http://life.umt.edu/vpsa/student\\_conduct.php](http://life.umt.edu/vpsa/student_conduct.php).

**Plagiarism.** Submitting work of someone else as your own is a serious violation of journalistic ethics and the University of Montana Student Conduct Code. An act of plagiarism will result in an F for the course and possible disciplinary sanction by the University.

**Collaborative efforts.** The quality of opinion framing and writing can benefit from collaborative efforts among colleagues. Feel free to discuss your ideas and writing and seek feedback from other people. But the writing you do in this class must be your own.

**All assignments are due at the beginning of class on the due date.** I will mark down late submissions the equivalent of two letter grades. In rare instances involving documentable extenuating circumstances, such as hospitalization, I may grant an extension.

**University policy regarding accommodations for students with disabilities:** This course is accessible to and usable by otherwise qualified students with disabilities. To request reasonable program modifications, please consult with the professor. Disability Services for Students will assist the professor and student in the accommodation process. For more information, visit UM's Disability Services Web site: <http://life.umt.edu/dss/>.

## Grading

First editorial	75 (35 draft/40 final)
Second editorial	75 (35 draft/40 final)
Third editorial	100 (50 draft/50 final)
First review	100 (50 draft/50 final)
Op-ed column	100 (50 draft/50 final)
Second review	100 (50 draft/50 final)
First personal column	100 (50 draft/50 final)
Second personal column	150 (75 draft/75 final)
Writing total:	800
Class participation:	200
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,000 points</b>

Grades on written assignments will reflect the following criteria:

A: Suitable for publication. Compelling topic; clear, flowing, precise writing that conveys appropriate passion or personality; sound argument; reflects thorough reporting; well-focused with excellent organization and structure; correct grammar, punctuation and Associated Press style. Facts and quotes are appropriately and skillfully attributed.

B: Suitable for publication with minor revision. Interesting topic presented well but needs further polish or minor additional reporting to meet the standards of an A. Writing is clear and conveys appropriate passion or personality; focus is good but might bear improving; reflects thorough reporting; good structure and organization; correct grammar, punctuation and Associated Press style. Facts and quotes are correctly attributed.

C: Adequately fulfills assignment but merits significant revision or additional reporting to merit publication. Flaws may include dull topic or unclear focus, writing that lacks creativity or clarity; weak premise or argument; lack of evidence; minor errors of fact or grammar, spelling, punctuation and Associated Press style.

D: Not publishable because of one or more serious flaws, including poor or inappropriate topic; unpolished writing; poor focus; flawed premise; unsound argument; significant problems of focus, organization, syntax, spelling, grammar, punctuation or Associated Press style; serious factual error; imperfect attribution of facts or quotes.

F: Fails to fulfill the assignment. Flaws may include serious factual errors, libel, serious ethical problems (such as obtaining consideration in exchange for a positive review); plagiarism; fabrication of information; inappropriate choice or treatment of topic; serious writing flaws; lack of effective argumentation; lack of supporting evidence; failure to adequately attribute facts and quotes.



**Final grades for the course are based on a 1,000-point scale as follows:**

900-1000 = A  
800-899 = B  
700-799 = C  
600-699 = D  
0-600 = F

**Extra credit.** The syllabus details opportunities for extra credit. I may provide more opportunities as the course progresses.

### Major due dates

Sept. 18: First editorial draft  
Sept. 23: Final version first editorial  
Sept. 25: Second editorial draft  
Sept. 30: Wolf-hunt editorial draft  
Oct. 2: Second editorial final  
Oct. 9: Wolf-hunt editorial final  
Oct. 12: Extra-credit editorial  
Oct. 23: First review draft  
Nov. 2: First review final

Nov. 4: Op-ed column draft  
Nov. 6: Second review draft  
Nov. 13: Second review final  
Nov. 16: First personal column draft  
Nov. 30: First personal column final  
Dec. 4: Second personal column draft  
Dec. 7: Op-ed column final  
Dec. 11: Second personal column final

## Class Schedule

*This schedule is preliminary and subject to change based on class progress.*

Monday, Aug. 31

### **Introduction**

*Why this course is essential for your future*

#### **Assignment for next class:**

- Listen to NPR "On The Media" podcast:  
<http://www.onthemedial.org/transcripts/2006/06/02/06>
- Read "The Editorial Page That Used to Be," from "The Why, Who and How of the Editorial Page," by Kenneth Rystrom.
- Read "Close the J Schools," by Richard Sine.
- Write 350-500 words responding to Sine's essay, incorporating details from your education and plans. Turn in via e-mail by start of Wednesday's class.

Wednesday, Sept. 2

### **The American experience: a river of opinion runs through it**

*Democracy is a system of clashing opinions*

Written response to Richard Sine's essay due via e-mail by start of class today.

#### **Assignment for next class:**

- Read Michael Gartner's Sept. 16, 2005, speech to the National Conference of Editorial Writers.
- Read "The Twilight of Objectivity: How Opinion Journalism Could Change the Face of the News," by Michael Kinsley.
- Read "America's Newest Profession: Bloggers for Hire," by Mark Penn.

Friday, Sept. 4

### **Opinion that matters**

*Journalistic opinion vs. opinionated journalism*

#### **Assignment for next class:**

- Read "The Lost Art of Argument," by Christopher Lasch.
- Read a news story of your choice on a Web site that lets readers post comments. Bring a hard copy of the story and your comment to class on Wednesday, Sept. 9, to read and discuss with class and turn in for credit.

#### **Long-term assignment:**

- Study "Fifty Writing Tools" by Roy Peter Clark and listen to his "Writing Toolbox" podcasts at  
<http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=78&aid=103943>
  - *You will demonstrate use of various "Writing Tools" in the articles you write during the term, beginning with the editorial due Sept. 18.*

<b>Labor Day Holiday: Monday, Sept. 7</b>
---

Wednesday, Sept. 9

**Editorial writing**

*Once the soul of the newspaper, editorials are a useful building block for today's pundit*

Bring to class today a hard copy of the comment you posted online.

**Assignment for next class:**

- Read "Is Persuasion Dead?" by Matt Miller.
- Read "Gripping About Newspaper Editorials Doesn't Change," by Michael Gartner.
- Read "Reporting the Editorial," by Jay Bookman from "Beyond Argument: A Handbook for Editorial Writers."
- Read "42 Ways to Write an Editorial," by Paul Greenburg.
- Begin researching an editorial topic of your choice. Write a brief summary including your premise, evidence and conclusion. List or hyperlink your sources. Due via e-mail by the start of Monday's class. Bring a hard copy to class for presentation and discussion.

Friday, Sept. 11

**Argumentation and editorial-writing techniques**

*Time-honored approaches for writing compelling editorials*

Monday, Sept. 14

**Editorial briefing**

*Class presentation and discussion of proposed editorials*

**Assignment due Sept. 18**

- Write a 350-500-word editorial. Due via e-mail by start of class Friday, Sept. 18. Include hyperlinks or endnotes indicating your sources. Highlight three sentences in your text demonstrating Roy Peter Clark's "Writing Tools" 1-3.

Wednesday, Sept. 16

**Critical thinking**

*Everybody's opinion may be valid, but not every argument is*

**Assignment for next class (continues on next page):**

- Read "Messages and Heuristics: How Audiences Form Attitudes About Emerging Technologies," by Dietram Scheufele.
- Read "The Word Lab," by Nicholas Lehman.
- Read PBS "Frontline" interview with Frank Luntz
- Optional: Watch Segment 5, "Giving Us What We Want," from PBS "Frontline: The Persuaders":  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/persuaders/>



**Extra-credit assignment:**

- Find in the media a good example of an editorial that demonstrates deductive or inductive reasoning. Find an example of an opinion based on a fallacious argument. Submit hard copies, and, in one page or less, discuss the differences, and evaluate the effectiveness of each approach. Submit via e-mail by Sept. 30.

Friday, Sept. 18

**How people form opinions**

*Shaping public opinion combines science with art*

First editorial draft due via e-mail by start of class today.

**Assignment for next class:**

- Listen to NPR "On the Media" segment "Debunk This!":  
<http://www.onthemedial.org/transcripts/2009/07/03/01>

Monday, Sept. 21

**Editorial review**

*In-class critique and discussion of your first editorials*

**Assignment for next class:**

- Revise first editorials. Final due via e-mail by start of class Sept. 23.

**Assignment due Friday, Sept. 25**

- Rewrite your first editorial to take an opposing position. Hyperlink or use endnotes to show sources. Highlight three sentences demonstrating Roy Peter Clark's "Writing Tools" 7-9. Due via e-mail by start of class Sept. 25.

Wednesday, Sept. 23

**Class editorial project**

*Class will work through several sessions to extensively research and editorialize on issues dealing with Montana's proposed hunting season for wolves.*

Final version of first editorial due via e-mail by start of class.

**Assignment for next class (continues on next page):**

Pore over background:

- <http://fwp.mt.gov/wildthings/wolf/default.html>
- <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/species/mammals/wolf/>
- <http://www.earthjustice.org/news/press/2009/conservation-groups-challenge-northern-rockies-wolf-delisting.html>



- [http://www.defenders.org/programs and policy/in the courts/legal docket/northern rockies gray wolf-delisting challenge 2009.php](http://www.defenders.org/programs_and_policy/in_the_courts/legal_docket/northern_rockies_gray_wolf-delisting_challenge_2009.php)
- Do additional reporting: interviews, review press coverage.
- Write a one-page summary of your reporting, due via e-mail by start of class Friday. Bring hard copy to class for discussion.

Friday, Sept. 25

**Editorial roundtable**

*Discussion of wolf-hunting research, framing issues and testing arguments*

Second editorial draft – taking the opposite position of the first – due via e-mail by start of class today.

One-page written summary of your wolf-hunting reporting due in class today.

**Assignment due Sept. 30:**

- Fill in gaps in wolf-hunt reporting.
- Write an editorial regarding Montana's proposed wolf hunt. Due via e-mail by start of class Sept. 30. Hyperlink or use endnotes to show sources. Highlight three sentences demonstrating use of Roy Peter Clark's "Writing Tools" 11-13.

Monday, Sept. 28

**Editorial Review**

*In-class critique and discussion of second editorials*

**Assignment for Oct. 2:**

- Revise second editorial. Final version due via e-mail by start of class Oct. 2.

Wednesday, Sept. 30

**Ethics:**

*All's Fair? Marquess of Queensbury Rules v. Kung Fu Fighting*

Wolf-hunt editorial draft due via-email today.

Extra-credit assignment – identifying deductive reasoning and fallacies – due via e-mail by start of class.

**Assignment for next class:**

- Read National Conference of Editorial Writers' "Statement of Principles."

Friday, Oct. 2

**Ethics, continued**

*Whose interests do you serve?*

Final version of second editorial due via-email by start of class today.

**Assignment for Oct. 23:**

- You will be assigned a publication. Interview the editor or staffer responsible for monitoring comments posted online. Write a brief summary of that publication's policy and practice. Due via e-mail by start of class Oct. 23. Bring hard copy to class for presentation.

Monday, Oct. 5

**Editorial review**

*In-class critique and discussion of wolf-hunt editorials*

**Assignment for next class:**

- Read Washington Post Writers Group "Editorial Roundtable: How Do You Do the Things That You Do?"

**Assignment for Oct. 9:**

- Revise wolf-hunt editorial as needed. Final editorial due via e-mail by start of class Oct. 9.

Wednesday, Oct. 7

**Collaboration and conflict**

*Working with editorial boards and publishers*

**Assignment for next class:**

*Prepare for new segment on criticism:*

- Listen to NPR report "As Newspapers Downsize, Cities Lose Arts Critics," by Laura Syddell:  
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=102972308>
- Read NYT's "Are Book Reviewers Out of Print?" by Motoko Rich.
- Read "Not Everyone's a Critic," by Richard Schickel.
- Read "Whatever Happened to Regional Critics?" by Terry Teachout.
- Read "Literary Death Spiral: The Fading Book Section," by Dick Meyer.
- Browse a variety of criticism Web sites; bring to class hard copies of a review you think is particularly good.

**Extra-credit assignment:**

- Write 350-500-word editorial about state of criticism, whether it matters and why. Hyperlink or use endnotes to indicate sources. Due beginning of class Monday, Oct. 12.

Friday, Oct. 9

**Criticism**

*The journalist as interpreter of culture*

Final version of wolf-hunt editorial due via e-mail by start of class.

**Assignments due Oct. 23 and Nov. 6:**

- Write two reviews, at least one of a live performance. Types of reviews may include theater, live music, recently recorded music, current movie, recently published book, dance performance, restaurant or recently released video game. I must approve in advance any other subjects for review.
  - **First review due Oct. 23.** Hyperlink or use endnotes to identify sources. Highlight three sentences demonstrating Roy Peter Clark's "Writing Tools" 14-16.
  - **Second review due Nov. 6.** Hyperlink or use endnotes to identify sources. Highlight three sentences demonstrating Roy Peter Clark's "Writing Tool" 22.
- Read "The Gathering Dark Age," by Roger Ebert.
- Read "Open Wide: Spoon-Fed Cinema," by A.O. Scott.
- Prepare to discuss in class Monday how reviewers might better serve younger audiences.

Monday, Oct. 12

**Criticism roundtable**

*Class discussion springing from readings, with emphasis on the future of journalistic criticism and serving younger audiences.*

**Assignment for next class:**

- Choose a subject for review, gathering enough background on your subject to discuss with the class on Wednesday.

Wednesday, Oct. 14

**Launching first round of reviews**

*In-class discussion of proposed reviews, approaches, reporting*

**Assignment for next class:**

- Finish reviewing "Fifty Writing Tools," and finish listening to Roy Peter Clark "Writing Tools" podcasts.

Friday, Oct. 16

**Writing workshop**

*Class discussion of techniques for better writing*



Monday, Oct. 19

**Writing workshop, continued**

*More techniques for better writing*

**Assignment for next class:**

- Read "Anonymity & the Net," by Victoria Murphy Barret.
- Watch "Dennis Kneale Freaks Out":  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/07/01/dennis-kneale-freaks-out\\_n\\_223716.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/07/01/dennis-kneale-freaks-out_n_223716.html)
- Read "Nameless in Cyberspace," by Jonathan D. Wallace.

Wednesday, Oct. 21

**Responsibility, accountability, civility**

*Online opinion forums don't bring out the best in everyone*

**Assignment for next class:**

- You've been assigned a publication. Interview the editor or staffer responsible for monitoring comments posted online. Write a brief summary of that publication's policy and practice. Due via e-mail by start of Friday's class. Bring hard copy to class Friday for presentation.

Friday, Oct. 23

**Managing the cacophony**

*Moderating online forums*

First review draft due via e-mail by start of class.

You'll make a brief presentation explaining online forum monitoring at your assigned publication in class today.

**Assignment for next class:**

- Read "Maple Beat the Law with the 'Big Lie,'" by J. Theodore Diadiun.
- Read Milkovich v. Lorain Journal:  
<http://laws.findlaw.com/us/497/1.htm>

**Extra-credit assignment:**

- Find online, and print out an opinion illustrating probable libel under the Milkovich standard. Circle the defamatory statement in question.

Monday, Oct. 26

**Legal issues**

*Opinions, libel, fighting words and incitement*

Extra-credit libel example due today.

Wednesday, Oct. 28

**Review review**

*In-class discussion of first round of reviews*

**Assignment for next class:**

- Revise first review. Final due via e-mail Nov. 2.
- Read several recent newspaper op-ed columns in preparation for Friday's discussion.

Friday, Oct. 30

**Writing op-ed columns**

*Mastering the journalistic equivalent of the persuasive essay*

**Assignment due Wednesday, Nov. 4:**

- Research and write a 700-to-900-word op-ed column of on an issue of your choice and relative expertise. Due via e-mail by start of class Wednesday, Nov. 4.

Monday, Nov. 2

**Op-ed discussion**

*In-class presentation and discussion of op-ed topics, expertise asserted, premises, arguments, audience, target publication and writing challenges*

Final version of first review due via e-mail by start of class.

**Assignment for next class:**

- Read "Behind TV Analysts, Pentagon's Hidden Hand," by David Barstow

Wednesday, Nov. 4

**Opinion or propaganda?**

*Government officials and so-called "experts" sometimes dish out self-serving opinion intended to mislead*

Op-ed column draft due via e-mail today.

**Assignment for next class:**

- Read "The Making of a Columnist," by Leonard Pitts.
- Read "Accepting Risk, Embracing Life," by Michael Moore.

Friday, Nov. 6

**Personal columns**

*It's not about you*

Second review draft due via e-mail by start of class today.

**Assignment for next class:**

- Choose a topic for a general interest column, and prepare to discuss in class Friday, Nov. 13.

**Assignments for Nov. 16 and Dec. 4:**

- Two column assignments due:
  - **Nov. 16:** Column of 650 to 850 words on a topic of general interest suitable for a mainstream-media publication
  - **Dec. 4:** Column of 650 to 850 words based largely on “shoe leather” – firsthand reporting taking the reader into the middle of an issue or compelling story

Monday, Nov. 9

**Reporting for columns**

*Traditional reporting methods are essential, but creative columns call for creative approaches to reporting*

<b>Veterans Day Holiday: Wednesday, Nov. 11</b>
---

Friday, Nov. 13

**Columnists' roundtable**

*Class discussion of column topics and approaches*

Final version of second review due via e-mail by start of class today.

**Assignment for next class:**

- Read “Getting to the Source: Preventing Plagiarism” and “The First Peril: Fabrication,” by Chip Scanlan.

Monday, Nov. 16

**Columnists and plagiarism**

*Kleptomania plagues the ranks of columnists*

First personal column draft due via e-mail by start of class.



Wednesday, Nov. 18

**Op-ed column review**

*Class discussion of op-ed columns*

**Assignment for Dec. 7:**

- Revise op-ed column. Final due by start of class Dec. 7.

Friday, Nov. 20

**Column critique**

*Class discussion of first columns*

**Assignment due Nov. 30:**

- Revise first column. Final due by start of class Monday, Nov. 30.

**Assignment for next class:**

- Read "New York Times: News Blogs and Online Columns."
- Read "Expert Opinions from Neutral Observers," by Clark Hoyt.
- Read "A Few Points Along the Line Between News and Opinion," by Daniel Okrent.

Monday, Nov. 23

**Blurred lines**

*Examining the ill-defined distinctions among news and opinion blogs and columns*

<b>Thanksgiving Break</b>
---------------------------

Monday, Nov. 30

**Stylish writing**

*Sophisticated techniques that'll make your column sing*

Final version of first column due via e-mail by start of class today.

**Assignment for next class:**

- Read "Why Neoconservative Pundits Love Jon Stewart," by Jacob Gershman.
- Read "The 2007 Theodore H. White Lecture on Press and Politics," by Maureen Dowd.

Wednesday, Dec. 2

**Humor and satire columns**

*Jon Stewart makes it look easy. It isn't*

**Assignment for next class:**

- Read "NCEW Challenge: Inventing Opinion Pages' Future," by Eddie Roth.

Friday, Dec. 4

**Community interaction**

*Ideally, commentary flows in both directions*

Monday, Dec. 7

**Finding your voice**

*Writing columns that sound distinctly like you*

Final version of op-ed column due via e-mail by start of class.

Wednesday, Dec. 9

**Column critique**

*Class discussion of second personal columns*

**Assignment for next class:**

- Revise final column. Due via e-mail by start of class Friday.

Friday, Dec. 11

**In summary**

*Course review and evaluation*

Final version of second column due via e-mail by start of class.