

Your Voice Matters: Opinion Writing for Maximum Impact (WRPR 1006A)

Middlebury College, Winter Term 2020
Hours: M, T, Th, F, 1:00-3:00 pm
Room: Library 230
Office Hours: Wilson Café

Instructor: Susan Greenberg
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Tuesday 3-4 pm; Thursday 12-1 pm,

“Opinions are like assholes, everybody’s got one and everyone thinks everyone else’s stinks.”

--Simone Elkeles

How are opinions formed? Do they ever really change? And how can we make our voices heard—and heeded—amid the hostile roar of the public square, especially in this era of partisanship and fake news? That’s what we will work toward in this class: expressing a clear point of view through incisive, accessible, data-driven, and eloquent arguments. The goal is for you to produce at least one original, polished, thought-provoking opinion piece for publication. Because what’s the point of writing if no one is going to read your work?

Assignments: You will complete three major papers this term: an op-ed a reported personal essay, and a review. None will be longer than 1,000 words. For the first two pieces, you will be required to submit a rough draft, for which I will provide feedback but no grade; you will only receive a grade on the revised final version.

You will also be required to complete a number of shorter written assignments in class or for homework. All work should be submitted as Word documents, double-spaced and emailed to me as attachments, **before the start of class** on the day they are due. No PDFs or Google docs, please, and no hard copies. (I am trying to go paperless). Late assignments will be penalized one-third of a grade for each day they are late.

Class format: Most classes will include four components:

1. *Presentation.* We will begin every class with a student-led discussion of an op-ed of their choosing. Since I’ve selected all the other readings, this is your chance to share a piece that *you* want to talk about, whether because it’s excellent, terrible, provocative, illuminating, or noteworthy in some other way. It doesn’t matter, as long as it is timely, reasonably short (under 1,000 words), compelling to you, and worthy of discussion. When it’s your turn, you will email your chosen piece to the class **by midnight the day before you are scheduled to present**; everyone must read and be ready to talk about it by the start of the next class. The presenter will introduce it, say a few words about why they chose it, and then initiate discussion with questions or comments.
2. *Discussion.* We will also discuss the assigned readings for the day, almost all of which are a) relatively short, b) highly readable, and c) exemplary in some way.
3. *Lesson/Exercise.* Most days you will complete a short, in-class writing or editing exercise, either independently or in groups. Because nothing improves writing like writing!

4. *Workshop.* We will hold regular workshops to critique your rough drafts before final drafts are due. Every student will have at least one major piece workshopped by the class. Etiquette rules to follow.

Coffee break: We will take a short break somewhere in the middle of each class, so please try to wait until then if you need to get up for any reason.

Texts: You do not need to purchase any textbooks for this course; all the assigned texts and articles are available online, though some may be behind a pay wall so will require access through the Midd library. I will send and post on Canvas an assignment syllabus each week with links to the readings, as well as distribute relevant handouts. In addition, you must follow the news daily, using whatever sources you like as well as a “legacy” newspaper—*The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, The Guardian, The South China Morning Post, etc.* **All assigned readings are mandatory and must be completed by the start of each class, as they will inform our discussions.**

Attendance: You must attend every class and arrive on time. Three tardies will count as an unexcused absence; any unexcused absences will be counted as a cut and will impact your grade. If you know ahead of time that you will not be in class for any reason, please let me know. You are responsible for making up any work missed. I will not chase you down.

Technology: Cellphones are not allowed in class. If you know you cannot resist your phone’s addictive allure, please leave it in your room. Otherwise it must remain in your pocket or backpack at all times. Laptops and tablets may be brought to class but must remain closed unless otherwise instructed; you may use them for in-class exercises and writing assignments, for example.

Free pass: Everyone has a bad day, when you are feeling sick, stressed, tired, or otherwise incapacitated. Fear not; you are entitled to one (1) free pass, which you may apply without consequence to any homework or classroom assignment that you are unable or unwilling to complete. (Please note that the pass does *not* apply to your article presentation, any of the major writing assignments or the readings.) If you know ahead of time when you would like to take your “bye,” please let me know in advance. Otherwise, I will just apply it to your first missed assignment. Subsequent ones will be penalized.

Honor and Integrity: Your foremost responsibility is to take an ethical approach to this course, your classmates, and your written work. I never thought I’d have to say something this obvious, but experience has taught me otherwise: **do not try to pass off another’s work as your own.** If you are caught—and be warned, I am a first-rate plagiarism detector—you will automatically fail this course and face disciplinary action, which typically includes suspension and a permanent mark on your transcript.

When you use outside sources to bolster your arguments, you must be meticulous in attributing them. Do not take ideas, direct quotes, data, or any other information from another source without crediting it in your work—by hyperlink, citation (“according to the New York Times...”), or both. We will go over carefully how to do this, but if you ever have any doubt, please ask.

You may not submit anything you've already written for another class or publication unless you discuss it with me first. But you are permitted—even encouraged—to turn to your classmates ***in this course only*** to brainstorm ideas, test out arguments, and share information or sources. You are also encouraged to help each other edit and proofread final copy. And you are always welcome to get help from the Writing Center. Please ***do not*** seek any other outside assistance.

Assessment: Grading something as subjective as writing—especially opinion writing—is difficult. I wish I didn't have to do it, but I do. I will use checks, pluses, and minuses in assessing class exercises and short pieces, and letter grades for longer stories.

Everyone has the potential to get an A; you are being evaluated not against your classmates but against yourself. To earn a top grade, a piece must be well-conceived, comprehensively researched, solidly structured, and clearly written, with virtually no mistakes in spelling, grammar, or syntax.

Your final grade for the course will reflect effort, engagement, and growth as well as mastery of the material. I am looking for initiative and creativity in conceiving ideas; solid preparation for and participation in class discussions and group work; and overall effort and improvement in your written work. Be present, be engaged, and throw yourself into the material, and you will do very well.

Approximate Grading Breakdown

Class Preparation/Participation	20 %
Open Op-Ed	20 %
Reported Personal essay	20 %
Review	15 %
Homework/Classroom Assignments	15 %
Effort/Engagement/Growth	10 %

Assignments and Readings

Week 1: Fact vs. Opinion

Monday, 1/6/20

Introductions; how do we form opinions?

Homework (due Tuesday):

READ:

[Why Don't Facts Matter?](#) By Tali Sharot

[Want to Change Minds? Try This.](#) By Tali Sharot

[To Avoid Getting Duped By Fake News, Think Like A Fact Checker](#) by Sam Wineburg and Sarah McGrew

[Journalism is now opinion-based—not news-based](#) by Joe Concha. (Please click on embedded links to Rand and Pew reports and read those as well.)

[Bias is good. It just needs a label.](#) By Bill Adair
[How To Write An Effective Thank You Letter](#)

WRITE:

A thank-you note to anyone you wish. It could be to your grandma for the sweater she gave you, your first-grade teacher for teaching you to read, or your best friend who moved away. Be clear and sincere, making a case for why you are grateful using plenty of details and specific, colorful examples: what exactly are you thankful for? Why? How have you used or how will you use the gift? What do you like about it? Why is it meaningful? You must write a minimum of 250 words. Please bring a copy to class; we will be sharing these. For inspiration, peruse these [Letters of Note](#).

Tuesday, 1/7/20

Can minds be changed?

Homework (due Thursday)

READ:

[Tips for Aspiring Op-Ed Writers](#) by Bret Stephens

[How to Write an Op-Ed or Column](#) by Harvard Kennedy School

--Inside Reporting: Op-Eds (pp. 134-135) by Tim Harrower (

--Classmate selection for discussion Thursday

[State lawmakers acknowledge lobbyists helped craft their op-eds attacking](#)

[Medicare-for-all](#) by Jeff Stein

WRITE: An op-ed on whether or not colleges should ban vaping on campus. Pick a side and stick to it, grounding your argument in concrete examples and data. (This [New York Times](#) story is a good place to start.) You are free to research the subject as deeply as you want, but any information you pick up from another source **must** be attributed by hyperlink and/or direct citation in the body of your text (i.e. "...as the New York Times reported last month," or "...according to a Dec. 19 study by the CDC.") Do not incorporate footnotes. You may include your own observations, but you may **not** write in the first person; omniscient narration only. Please submit your work as a Word document attached to an email to me. (Due: before the start of class Thursday. 500-750 words)

Thursday, 1/9/20

Homework (due Friday)

READ:

--Classmate selection for discussion Friday

[When is Speech Violence](#) by Lisa Feldman Barrett

[Why It's a Bad Idea to Tell Students Words are Violence](#) by Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff

[How the Insufferably Woke Help Trump](#) by Timothy Egan

[The End of Neoliberalism and the Rebirth of History](#) by Joseph Stiglitz

[The Importance of Dumb Mistakes in College](#) by Jim Reische

WRITE:

Assignment TBA. (Write op-ed on vaping taking the /opposite/ position of the one you argued yesterday.)

Friday, 1/11/19

Arguing both sides

Homework (due Monday)

READ:

--Classmate selection for discussion Monday

[America, Can We Talk About Your Drinking?](#) By Gabrielle Glaser

[Ripping children from parents will shatter America's soul](#) by Viet Thanh Nguyen

[Struggling to Serve at the Nation's Richest University](#) by Rosa Ines Rivera

["Are you a doctor?" The unchecked racism faced by physicians of color.](#) By Vidya Viswanathan

[Hey Computer Scientists! Stop Hating on the Humanities](#) by Emma Pierson

WRITE:

Draft of an op-ed on any subject you wish. 700-800 words. Whatever you choose to write about, make sure you take a clear and forceful—perhaps even provocative—stand. You can always soften it later in the piece, but you've got to say something bold to draw the reader in. Make your case using plenty of data (be sure to link to/incorporate attributions to any outside sources you use), vivid examples, and illuminating details. Avoid using first-person ("I") narration unless it's essential to your topic, in which case you should use it sparingly. Use minimal adjectives—let your verbs do the work—and a measured, reasonable tone; outrage and hysteria will not win anyone over. Be sure to consider and address any potential opposing arguments in the piece. Remember, you can't change minds through brute force or raw emotion; meet people where they are. (700-800 words; please email me your piece as a Word document attachment and bring two copies to class.)

Week 2: The Open Op-Ed

Monday, 1/13/20

The rough draft/peer edit

READ:

Classmate selection for presentation (Blaise)

[Give Joe Biden his Due](#) by Frank Bruni

[Of Course Bernie Can Win](#) by Bret Stephens

[Who Killed the Knapp Family?](#) By Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn

[Warren Zevon's Wisdom for the 2020s](#) by Peggy Noonan

[WSJ's Peggy Noonan says progressives are "mean and seek to kill"?](#) by Emil Guillermo

Tuesday, 1/7/20

Workshopping

Homework (due Thursday)

READ:

Classmate selection for presentation

[The Case for Reparations](#) by Ta-Nehisi Coates. Pay close attention to the different threads of his argument and how he pulls them together.

WRITE:

One paragraph reflection on Coates piece. Write raw, don't over-think. (150-250 words)

WORK ON:

Revision of open op-ed, due Friday

Thursday, 1/9/20

Letters and Editorials

Homework (due Friday)

- READ:** Classmate selection for presentation
The Campus
[Mayor Pete's South Bend Record](#) by the WSJ Editorial Board (This may be behind the Wall Street Journal's pay wall, in which case you should be able to access it through the library website.)
- WRITE:** --A letter to the editor of The Campus, about any article you wish. You must offer some critique, either positive or negative, of the content or approach of the article you choose. (150-250 words)
--Final draft of your open op-ed, due by start of class Friday

Friday, 1/11/19

Homework (due Tuesday—no class Monday for MLK Day)

- READ:** Classmate selection for presentation
[Poor Teeth](#) by Sarah Smarsh
[Me and my quarter-life crisis: a millennial asks what went wrong](#) by Juliana Piskorz
[My Family's Slave](#) by Alex Tizon
[I Used to Write for Sports Illustrated. Now I Deliver Packages for Amazon.](#) By Austin Murphy
[Is Anyone Happy Anymore?](#) By Niall Williams
[Pregnant at Harvard?](#) By Anonymous
[Among College Students, the Frenzied Competition to Work for No Pay](#) by Susan H. Greenberg
[I smoked weed with my son. We're closer now.](#) By Susan H. Greenberg
- WRITE:** Draft of a personal reported essay, 750-1,000 words. Due: Tuesday before start of class.

Week 3: The Personal Reported Essay

Tuesday, 1/21/20

Homework (due Wednesday)

- READ:** --Classmate selection for presentation Wed
--Classmate essays for workshop
[The Man Behind the Metal Detector](#) by Adam Stumacher
[Children Don't Always Live](#) by Jayson Greene

Wednesday, 1/22/20

Homework (due Thursday)

- READ:** --Classmate selection for presentation Thurs
--Classmate essays for workshop
[Sexual Attraction and Fluidity](#) by Charles M. Blow

WORK ON: [What Do Our Ashes Mean to Us?](#) By Jennifer Finney Boylan
Revisions to your personal reported essay

Thursday, 1/23/20

Homework (due Friday)

READ: --Classmate selection for presentation Fri
--The Campus
WRITE: Letter to the Campus editor
WORK ON: Revisions to your personal reported essay

Friday, 1/24/20

Homework (due Monday)

READ: --Classmate selection for presentation
--A selection of 5-6 professional reviews (movie, book, restaurant, play, concert, dance performance, art exhibit, etc.) Please bring one example you admire to class.
PLAN: What you want to review: movie, restaurant, performance, etc. You may want to take in your review subject over the weekend (see the movie, watch the play, eat at the restaurant, etc.). Feel free to do so and be sure to take good notes, but you don't need to write yet.
WRITE: Final version of personal reported essay (due Monday)

Week 4: Reviews and Humor

Monday, 1/27/20

Reviews

Homework (due Tuesday)

READ: --Classmate selection for presentation
[Dolittle is one of the worst movies in years](#) by David Sims
[Class warfare is on full display in director Bong Joon-ho's provocative 'Parasite'](#) by Hau Chu
[The Upbeat Appeal of "Good Trouble" and "Brooklyn Nine-nine"](#) by Emily Nussbaum
[Fish Out of Water in the Deep Blue Sea](#) by Ben Brantley
[A Memoir About Loving—and Then Resisting—Krispy Kreme, Chili Dogs, Cinnamon Biscuits...](#) by Dwight Garner
[Yelping Warriors, and Rocks in the Broth](#) by Frank Bruni

(Optional) WRITE: Rough draft of your review. (700-800 words) Choose something to review (movie, album, TV series, performance, restaurant, book, etc). Remember, your review should entertain and engage as well as enlighten readers about the benefits/drawbacks of taking in whatever you're reviewing. Make sure you SHOW—don't TELL—your opinion, using plenty of concrete examples to make your point. Adjectives are important but choose them carefully and use them sparingly.
***Please do NOT read any other reviews of whatever it is you're

covering; it's too easy to let other reviewers' opinions (and phrases) influence yours. But you may read as many reviews as you like of other things, just to get a feel for them. If you need information such as cast and crew names, dates, settings, publisher, location and the like, you should use sites like IMDb and Amazon rather than take them from other reviews.

Because time is so limited, the rough draft of this assignment is optional. If you get it to me by class time Tuesday, I will give you feedback by Wednesday for the final draft, which is due Thursday. Otherwise, you may just hand in the final draft Thursday.

Tuesday, 1/28/20

Reviews

Homework (due Wednesday)

READ/WATCH: --Classmate selection for presentation
[Gay Teen Worried He Might Be Christian](#), The Onion
[A Model Diet?](#) By Caroline Dunn
[A Collection of the 30 Most Disappointing Under 30](#), by Bess Kalb
[Ayatollah Mystified That He Is The Only Dictator Trump Dislikes](#) by Andy Borowitz
[Kumail Nanjiani SNL Opening Monologue](#) October 14, 2017

SELECT: A favorite example of satire or humor that makes same kind of political or social statement. It can be a cartoon, a short written piece, or a SHORT (under 5 minutes) audio or video clip. Think about why you find it funny and what makes it commentary. Email me the link by start of class Thursday so we can share them.

Wednesday, 1/29/20

Humor

Homework (due Thursday)

WRITE: Final draft of review

Thursday, 1/30/20

Final draft of review due
Evaluations
Pizza Party!