

**JOUR 499: Writing Opinion and Personal Essays For Publication**

**4 units**

**Spring 2017 – Tuesday – 2-5:20 p.m**

**Section:** 21502R

**Location:** ANN 413

**Instructor: Alan Mittelstaedt**

**Office:** By appointment in the Media Center

**Office Hours:** By appointment

**Contact Info:** [amittels@usc.edu](mailto:amittels@usc.edu)

1. **Course Description**

Students will tap into their well of convictions and write passionately about matters of public concern and personal interest. They will write, report, produce, publish and promote (through social media) opinion pieces and first-person essays. They will learn how to develop their voice. Their work will be published on our website at the media center.

Students will develop strategies for coming up with ideas for opinion-rich journalism as they connect their experiences and opinions to fast-paced daily news cycles. They will engage their critical thinking and communication skills and develop the art of persuasive writing.

# II. Overall Learning Objectives and Assessment

By the end of this course students will be able to produce provocative work full of opinion supported by rigorous argument. They will tap into their inner muses and write with a variety of styles including humor, outrage, conviction. Their work will speak both to those who agree and oppose their viewpoints. The value of persuasion and civility in modern discourse will be emphasized. Bombast can work, too, in measured doses.

Students will produce opinion pieces and personal essays on a weekly basis, with staggered deadlines to ensure work can be published in a timely manner. They also will produce a longer piece that addresses a matter of public concern.

Other outcomes include:

* Understanding the difference between opinion pieces and news stories and news analysis
* Acquiring research methods to bolster opinions about matters of public importance
* Engaging in critical and logical thinking about public policy
* Writing about complex matters in accessible ways for wide audiences
* Relating personal experiences in a compelling way
* Writing about issues facing underserved and diverse communities
* Summarizing pitches in one sentence
* Writing with strong verbs, varied sentence length, strong narrative elements, including scene and metaphor
* Producing work that follows the traditional structure of opinion pieces
* Producing work that breaks the rules of traditional opinion pieces
* Developing strategies for dealing with critics, including nasty comments anonymously made on their posts

**III.A. Description of Assignments, Newsroom structure, Communication policy**

**Opinion pieces:** A 500-700 word column provoked by an event in the immediate news cycle. The strongest pieces will focus on a single event or issue and take a strong stand supported by facts and analysis. You will produce a minimum of six opinion pieces over the course of the semester. You’ll pitch ideas any day of the week and produce pieces on tight deadlines to ensure your work is published while the issue remains fresh in the news. Deadlines will depend on when your pitch is approved.

**Personal essays:** A 500-700 word essay focusing on a personal experience with significance to a wider audience. These essays will be told in the first person. You will produce a minimum of five personal essays over the course of the semester. Essays may be prompted by an event in the news cycle or be unrelated, but they must be deemed relevant to our audience’s lives. You’ll pitch the idea any day of the week and produce the essay on a tight deadline.

**Long argument:** A 1,200-1,500 word reported essay on a key issue of public concern. The issue can pertain to government, sports, media, entertainment or other field. Three quoted sources are required. A minimum of five relevant links are required. The piece must exhibit a strong point of view. Pitches can be made at any point during the semester and must be approved. First drafts are due no later than Week 14.

**III.B. Newsroom structure**

This class will operate as a newsroom. We will produce content throughout the week for the media center website. A key part of our class time will be planning for at least the week ahead. Lectures and discussions about the rules and practices of opinion and essay writing will be based on current work

**III.C**. **Communication policy**

Since we will formally meet as a group only once a week, communication throughout the week is crucial. We will use Slack, both for group and one-on-one communication, and Quip, for filing your work and editing. Your timely response to messages and editing questions is important. A general rule to live by: Respond to a message within one hour, or faster, in most situations. Exceptions include religious holidays, classes, late nights.

**IV. Grading**

**a. Breakdown of Grade**

| Assignment | Points | | % of Grade |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Opinion pieces | 40 | | 40 |
| Personal essays | | 40 | 40 |
| Long argument | 10 | | 10 |
| Class participation | 10 | | 10 |
| **TOTAL** | **100** | | **100%** |

**b. Grading Scale**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 95 to 100: A | 70 to less than 75: C+ | 45 to less than 50: D- |
| 90 to less than 95: A- | 65 to less than 70: C | 0 to less than 45: F |
| 85 to less than 90: B+ | 60 to less than 65: C- |  |
| 80 to less than 85: B | 55 to less than 60: D+ |  |
| 75 to less than 80: B- | 50 to less than 55: D |  |

***Journalism***

All assignments will be edited on a professional basis.

**“A” pieces of writing** are accurate, clear, comprehensive and require only minor copyediting. Video work must also be shot and edited creatively, be well paced and include good sound bites and natural sound that add flavor, color or emotion.

**“B” pieces** require more than minor editing and have a few style or spelling errors or one significant error of omission. For video, there may be minor flaws in the composition of some shots or in the editing. Good use of available sound bites is required.

**“C” pieces** need considerable editing or rewriting and/or have many spelling, style or omission errors. Camera work and editing techniques in video stories are mediocre or unimaginative, but passable.

**“D” pieces** require excessive rewriting, have numerous errors and should not have been submitted. Camera work is unsatisfactory or fails to show important elements.

**“F” pieces** have failed to meet the major criteria of the assignment, are late, have numerous errors or both. Your copy should not contain any errors in spelling, style, grammar and facts. Any misspelled or mispronounced proper noun will result in an automatic “F” on that assignment. Any factual error will also result in an automatic “F” on the assignment. Accuracy is the first law of journalism. The following are some other circumstances that would warrant a grade of “F” and potential USC/Annenberg disciplinary action:

• Fabricating a story or making up quotes or information.

• Plagiarizing a script/article, part of a script/article or information from any source.

• Staging video or telling interview subjects what to say.

• Using video shot by someone else and presenting it as original work.

• Shooting video in one location and presenting it as another location.

• Using the camcorder to intentionally intimidate, provoke or incite a person or a group of people to elicit more “dramatic” video.

• Promising, paying or giving someone something in exchange for doing an interview either on or off camera.

• Missing a deadline.

**V. Assignment Submission Policy**

Students will post all drafts and links to published work on Quip. Deadlines for posting work will vary depending on each assignment.

**VI. Required Readings and Supplementary Materials**

* Well-informed writers produce the strongest opinion pieces and personal essays. It’s important to stay current on the news and read, view and listen to as many sources of information as possible. Your menu should include, but not be limited to the New York Times, Buzzfeed, The American Conservative, Vox, Huffington Post, Slate, Salon, ThriveGlobal, the Los Angeles Times, MSNBC, CNN, Fox, BBC, The Guardian, National Review, Al Jazeera, Talking Points Memo, Politico.
* George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language.” <http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e_polit/>

# Optional textbook: “Writing Opinion For Impact” 2nd Edition, Conrad C. Fink

**VII. Laptop Policy**

All undergraduate and graduate Annenberg majors and minors are required to have a PC or Apple laptop that can be used in Annenberg classes. Refer to the [Annenberg Virtual Commons](http://vc.uscannenberg.org/) for more information. To connect to USC’s Secure Wireless network, please visit USC’s [Information Technology Services](http://itservices.usc.edu/wireless/support/) website.

**VIII. Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown**

***Note:*** *This syllabus is subject to change based on our progress, news events or guest speaker availability.*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Topics/Daily Activities | Readings and Homework | Deliverable/Due Dates |
| Week 1  Date: 8/22 | --Introductions and syllabus review.  --What is opinion writing and how is it different from news writing and news analysis?  --The New Playing Field: Defining bias, objectivity, fairness, accuracy, ethics in newswriting and opinion making.  --Review basic structure of an opinion piece.  --In-class writing exercise based on top stories in the news. | Homework: Read a minimum of five opinion pieces or personal essays. Mark-up a hard copy of one of them and identify the key elements.  --Pitch an idea for an opinion piece or personal essay and be prepared to write it on a tight deadline.  --Read George Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language.” http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e\_polit/ | Homework due 9 p.m. the day before our next class. File drafts or links to published work on Quip. |
| Week 2  Date: 8/29 | --Critiques and Pitches: Review drafts, published work.  --Discuss the news and new ideas.  --Defining audience and our mission  --Channeling outrage and empathy  --Identifying the top 25 issues facing our audience.  --Structure review  --Discuss Orwell, Part 1 | --Homework: Pitch an idea for an opinion piece or personal essay and be prepared to write it on a tight deadline.  --Read a minimum of five opinion pieces or personal essays. Mark-up a hard copy of one of them and identify the key elements. | Homework due 9 p.m. the day before our next class. File drafts or links to published work on Quip. |
| Week 3  Date: 9/5 | --Critiques and Pitches: Review drafts, published work.  --Discuss the news and new ideas.  --Overcoming fear of sharing your views.  Developing your voice.  --Structure review  --Discuss Orwell, Part 2 | --Homework: Pitch an idea for an opinion piece or personal essay and be prepared to write it on a tight deadline.  --Read a minimum of five opinion pieces or personal essays. Mark-up a hard copy of one of them and identify the key elements. | [**Labor Day**: Monday, September 4]  Homework due 9 p.m. the day before our next class. File drafts or links to published work on Quip. |
| Week 4  Date: 9/12 | --Critiques and Pitches: Review drafts, published work.  --Discuss the news and new ideas.  --Embracing your enemy  --Strategies for persuasive writing  --Structure review | --Homework: Pitch an idea for an opinion piece or personal essay and be prepared to write it on a tight deadline.  --Read a minimum of five opinion pieces or personal essays. Mark-up a hard copy of one of them and identify the key elements. | Homework due 9 p.m. the day before our next class. File drafts or links to published work on Quip. |
| Week 5  Date: 9/19 | --Critiques and Pitches: Review drafts, published work.  --Discuss the news and new ideas.  --Personal essays: Using your own experience to persuade the masses | --Homework: Pitch an idea for an opinion piece or personal essay and be prepared to write it on a tight deadline.  --Read a minimum of five opinion pieces or personal essays. Mark-up a hard copy of one of them and identify the key elements. | Homework due 9 p.m. the day before our next class. File drafts or links to published work on Quip. |
| Week 6  Date: 9/26 | --Critiques and Pitches: Review drafts, published work.  --Discuss the news and new ideas.  --Writing humor | --Homework: Pitch an idea for an opinion piece or personal essay and be prepared to write it on a tight deadline.  --Read a minimum of five opinion pieces or personal essays. Mark-up a hard copy of one of them and identify the key elements. | Homework due 9 p.m. the day before our next class. File drafts or links to published work on Quip. |
| Week 7  Date: 10/3 | --Critiques and Pitches: Review drafts, published work.  --Discuss the news and new ideas.  --Mid-semester review: What are we doing well? What do we need to work on? | --Homework: Pitch an idea for an opinion piece or personal essay and be prepared to write it on a tight deadline.  --Read a minimum of five opinion pieces or personal essays. Mark-up a hard copy of one of them and identify the key elements. | Homework due 9 p.m. the day before our next class. File drafts or links to published work on Quip. |
| Week 8  Date: 10/10 | --Critiques and Pitches: Review drafts, published work.  --Discuss the news and new ideas.  --Refining personal essays. | --Homework: Pitch an idea for an opinion piece or personal essay and be prepared to write it on a tight deadline.  --Read a minimum of five opinion pieces or personal essays. Mark-up a hard copy of one of them and identify the key elements. | Homework due 9 p.m. the day before our next class. File drafts or links to published work on Quip. |
| Week 9  Date: 10/17 | --Critiques and Pitches: Review drafts, published work.  --Discuss the news and new ideas. | --Homework: Pitch an idea for an opinion piece or personal essay and be prepared to write it on a tight deadline.  --Read a minimum of five opinion pieces or personal essays. Mark-up a hard copy of one of them and identify the key elements. | Homework due 9 p.m. the day before our next class. File drafts or links to published work on Quip. |
| Week 10  Date: 10/24 | --Critiques and Pitches: Review drafts, published work.  -- Discuss the news and new ideas. | --Homework: Pitch an idea for an opinion piece or personal essay and be prepared to write it on a tight deadline.  --Read a minimum of five opinion pieces or personal essays. Mark-up a hard copy of one of them and identify the key elements. | Homework due 9 p.m. the day before our next class. File drafts or links to published work on Quip. |
| Week 11  Date: 10/31 | --Critiques and Pitches: Review drafts, published work.  --Discuss the news and new ideas. | --Homework: Pitch an idea for an opinion piece or personal essay and be prepared to write it on a tight deadline.  --Read a minimum of five opinion pieces or personal essays. Mark-up a hard copy of one of them and identify the key elements. | Homework due 9 p.m. the day before our next class. File drafts or links to published work on Quip. |
| Week 12  Date: 11/7 | --Critiques and Pitches: Review drafts, published work.  --Discuss the news and new ideas. | --Homework: Pitch an idea for an opinion piece or personal essay and be prepared to write it on a tight deadline.  --Read a minimum of five opinion pieces or personal essays. Mark-up a hard copy of one of them and identify the key elements. | Homework due 9 p.m. the day before our next class. File drafts or links to published work on Quip. |
| Week 13  Date: 11/14 | --Critiques and Pitches: Review drafts, published work.  --Discuss the news and new ideas. | --Homework: Pitch an idea for an opinion piece or personal essay and be prepared to write it on a tight deadline.  --Read a minimum of five opinion pieces or personal essays. Mark-up a hard copy of one of them and identify the key elements. | Homework due 9 p.m. the day before our next class. File drafts or links to published work on Quip.  --First drafts of Long Argument pieces due no later than Week 14. |
| Week 14  Date: 11/21 | --Critiques and Pitches: Review drafts, published work.  --Discuss the news and new ideas. | --Homework: Pitch an idea for an opinion piece or personal essay and be prepared to write it on a tight deadline.  --Read a minimum of five opinion pieces or personal essays. Mark-up a hard copy of one of them and identify the key elements.  --Final drafts of long argument pieces. | [**Thanksgiving Break**: Wednesday – Sunday, November 22-27] |
| Week 15  Date: 11/28 | --Celebration of our best work  --Review drafts of long argument pieces.  --Discuss future writing projects to be done outside this class  -Course evaluations | Homework: Revise long argument drafts. |  |
| FINAL EXAMS  Date and Time TBD | --Final drafts of long argument pieces due.  --Reflect on key principles of opinion writing and identify issues to monitor |  | **Date:** For the date and time of the final for this class, please consult the [Fall 2017 Final Exam Schedule](http://classes.usc.edu/term-20163/finals/). Graded work (exam, paper, project, etc.) must be due on the scheduled date of the final exam. |

**IX. Policies and Procedures**

**Internships**

The value of professional internships as part of the overall educational experience of our students has long been recognized by the School of Journalism. Accordingly, while internships are not required for successful completion of this course, any student enrolled in this course that undertakes and completes an approved, non-paid internship during this semester shall earn academic extra credit herein of an amount equal to 1 percent of the total available semester points for this course. To receive instructor approval, a student must request an internship letter from the Annenberg Career Development Office and bring it to the instructor to sign by the end of the third week of classes. The student must submit the signed letter to the media organization, along with the evaluation form provided by the Career Development Office. The form should be filled out by the intern supervisor and returned to the instructor at the end of the semester. No credit will be given if an evaluation form is not turned into the instructor by the last day of class. Note: The internship must by unpaid and can only be applied to one journalism class.

**Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems**

**a. Academic Conduct**

*Plagiarism*

Presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words - is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Section 11, *Behavior Violating University Standards* <https://scampus.usc.edu/b/11-00-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/>.

*USC School of Journalism Policy on Academic Integrity*

The following is the USC Annenberg School of Journalism’s policy on academic integrity and repeated in the syllabus for every course in the school:

“Since its founding, the USC School of Journalism has maintained a commitment to the highest standards of ethical conduct and academic excellence. Any student found plagiarizing, fabricating, cheating on examinations, and/or purchasing papers or other assignments faces sanctions ranging from an ‘F’ on the assignment to dismissal from the School of Journalism. All academic integrity violations will be reported to the office of Student Judicial Affairs & Community Standards (SJACS), as per university policy, as well as journalism school administrators.”

In addition, it is assumed that the work you submit for this course is work you have produced entirely by yourself, and has not been previously produced by you for submission in another course or Learning Lab, without approval of the instructor.

**b. Support Systems**

*Equity and Diversity*

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the *Office of Equity and Diversity* <http://equity.usc.edu/> or to the *Department of Public Safety* <http://dps.usc.edu/contact/report/>. This is important for the safety of the whole USC community. Another member of the university community - such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member - can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. *The Center for Women and Men*<http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage <https://sarc.usc.edu/> describes reporting options and other resources.

*Support with Scholarly Writing*

A number of USC’s schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* <http://ali.usc.edu/> which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students.

*The Office of Disability Services and Programs* <http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html>provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations.

Students requesting test-related accommodations will need to share and discuss their DSP recommended accommodation letter/s with their faculty and/or appropriate departmental contact person at least three weeks before the date the accommodations will be needed. Additional time may be needed for final exams. Reasonable exceptions will be considered during the first three weeks of the semester as well as for temporary injuries and for students recently diagnosed. Please note that a reasonable period of time is still required for DSP to review documentation and to make a determination whether a requested accommodation will be appropriate.

*Stress Management*

Students are under a lot of pressure. If you start to feel overwhelmed, it is important that you reach out for help. A good place to start is the USC Student Counseling Services office at 213-740-7711. The service is confidential, and there is no charge.

*Emergency Information*

If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, *USC Emergency Information* <http://emergency.usc.edu/> will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.

**X. About Your Instructor**

Alan Mittelstaedt started as an adjunct instructor in 2003 and joined the full-time faculty in fall 2009 to help manage Annenberg Digital News, which produced Neon Tommy, the forerunner of uscannenbergmedia.com, where he now is special projects advisor. For much of the previous decade, he was news editor at Los Angeles’ alt-weeklies, including seven years at the L.A. Weekly, where he wrote a political column and oversaw a staff of six hard-nosed reporters. He’s worked at mainstream newspapers. He was city editor at the Portland (Maine) Press Herald and at the Pasadena Star-News and was an investigative reporter and an editor at the San Bernardino County Sun, where he was surprised to be named Employee of the Year despite questioning many decisions of his Gannett bosses. When he was 15, he published his first article called “Deschooling Society: The Evils of Compulsory Education,” and handed out 1,000 copies at his rural Virginia high school over the protests of his principal, who threatened to suspend him.