



JOU4930: Special Study in Journalism: Opinion Writing and Editing  
Spring 2026

**Instructor:** Eric Althoff

**Location:** Online

**Class Times:** Tuesday, 5:10 PM - 8:10 PM

**Email:** ealthoff@ufl.edu

**Office Hours:** Tuesday and Wednesday, from 12:00 – 2:00 p.m. via Zoom (LINK TK)

**Course Overview:**

Students will learn the mechanics of opinion writing, inclusive of the basics of pitching, what makes a “good” opinion column, the editorial process and the differences between being an “in-house” staff writer versus a freelancer. Potential subjects to be covered include the difference between opinion and hard news, liaising between writers and editors, as well as the nuance of copy editing opinion writing. Students will draft opinion pieces about a variety of topics, edit one another’s work in a group forum, and receive instructor feedback. Lecture material will also incorporate discussions of AI and how it can both advantage and disadvantage opinion writing. Guest speakers to join as available.

**Required Textbooks:**

None

Various readings to be assigned (see syllabus)

## TENTATIVE COURSE SCHEDULE

*Specific weekly schedule elements subject to change at the instructor's discretion.*

**Week 1 (Jan. 13):** Introductions/Brief history of Opinion Writing/Get-to-Know-You Activities/The Difference Between News and Opinion

Prior to class please read the following pieces and be prepared to discuss:

### **A Short History of Opinion Journalism**

<https://digitalresource.center/content/short-history-opinion-journalism>

### **A PROFITABLE PUBLIC SPHERE: THE CREATION OF THE NEW YORK TIMES OP-ED PAGE**

[https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=cmj\\_facpub](https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=cmj_facpub)

**What's the difference between an editorial, an op-ed (opinion piece), and a letter to the editor of a publication/periodical, such as seen in the New York Times?**

<https://askus.library.tulsacc.edu/faq/392876>

The Onion (satirical “news” site)

<https://theonion.com/>

### **Week 2 (Jan. 20):** Opinion Writers/Workflow

- Prior to class read my short conversation with former Washington Post Opinion Editor David Shipley, found in Canvas
- Come to class ready to discuss an opinion writer or cultural commentator whose work you admire.
- Discussion of roles at an Opinion desk operates, from submissions to editors (such as David Shipley) to copy desk
- Guest speaker David Shipley (pending)
- Write short reflection paper (300-500 words) on what type of job you might want to work at an Opinion page

**Week 3 (Jan. 27):** Letters to the Editor Part 1: Introduction to the Alligator Opinion page and the Gainesville Sun's Letters to the Editor page

Prior to class, please read

<https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/advocacy/direct-action/letters-to-editor/main>

- What is a letter to the editor? Why are they important, whether at a campus newspaper such as the Gator or a major newspaper? Examples to be shared.
- Discuss Gainesville news of the day. Are there certain issues that are “better” for a LTTE than others? (Divide into groups.)
- Homework: Write a Letter to the Editor per Canvas prompt responding to a made-up Opinion article.
- Guest speaker: Alyssa Rosenberg (pending)

#### **Week 4 (Feb. 3): Letters to the Editor Part 2/Photo Selections Do's & Don't**

- Group-based activity: Discuss your Letters to the Editor. What was difficult or easy? Select one person to share what was learned with the class at the conclusion of breakout activity.
- Photo Selection for an Opinion piece. Discuss some no-no's from my time at The Post. Group activity: Make choices about photos for various Opinion pieces and discuss in group

#### **PHOTO SELECTION (PROTEST SIGNS WITH “F” BOMB, BODIES, ETC.)**

Homework: Create a Letter to the Editor, in response to an Alligator article of your choice; secondarily, submit the “prompt” to an AI program: “Write a Letter to the Editor based on this article.” Submit both for full credit. Be prepared to discuss the AI versus your own letter next week.

#### **Week 5 (Feb. 10): The Newspaper Editorial/Other Types of Opinion Writing Including Reviews**

- Please read prior to class:

#### **What Is Editorial Content in Journalism?**

<https://nytlicensing.com/latest/methods/what-editorial-content-journalism/>

- Read Canvas material on reviews for Week 5
- Guest speaker (TBA) from the Alligator and/or Gainesville Sun to discuss editorials; Q&A session to follow
- OR
- Guest speaker (Alyssa Rosenberg to discuss reviews)
- Activity: In groups have the “editorial board” come up with ideas to respond to a Gainesville news story. Discuss with class.
- More about reviews.
- Homework: Write a review of a recent film, concert, TV show or album.

#### **Week 6 (Feb. 17): Editorials Part 2**

- Point/counterpoint on the same issue.

- Group project: Divide into breakout groups and come up with bullet points either for or against (the instructor will choose the groups) the idea that the world is overpopulated. Discuss.
- Second group activity (timed exercise): Write a 500-word opinion to support your position.
- Class discussion: What was difficult?

### **Week 7 (Feb. 24): Opinion Writing Ethics and More**

Prior to class:

Read

'Washington Post' won't endorse in White House race for first time since 1980s

<https://www.npr.org/2024/10/25/nx-s1-5165353/washington-post-presidential-endorsement-trump-harris>.

- Read the NYT "Anonymous" Opinion article from 2018. [link TK]
  - Read my paper on the Anonymous article [link TK]
  - In class discuss the ethics behind the Anonymous article. What would you do in that situation?
  - What if you are asked to write an Opinion piece that goes against your own convictions? What if your employer changes longstanding policy?
  - What other issues does this bring up?
  - Ethics of using AI in Opinion writing
  - Guest speaker TBA (Fred Vultee)
- Reflection paper: Based on this week's discussions, what other types of ethical issues do you imagine might occur on an Opinion desk, now or in the future? Cite specific examples.

### **Week 8 (March 3): The Copy Desk/Fact Checking/Liaising with Writers/"Difficult" Writers**

- What is a copy desk? Why is it important?
- The tricks of working with difficult writers
- Who is the final arbiter if a writer complains?
- Guest speaker: Trey Johnson, former copy chief at The Washington Post Opinions page (and my former boss)
- Copy editing exercise for homework—edit for clarity and facts; write a professionally worded response email to the writer

### **Week 9 (March 10): Whose Headline Is It Anyway?**

- Group activity: Share your edits on last week's copy desk assignment. What did you learn?
- Headline writing. What makes a good headline and subhead?
- Discuss headlines on Opinion pieces such as last week's assignment. Other examples to follow.
- Guest speaker TBA

**Week 10 (March 17):** Spring Break, No class

**Week 11 (March 24):** Diversity on the Desk

Prior to call read and be prepared to discuss:

“The Washington Post Sees Major Exodus of Black Journalists”

<https://sdvoice.info/the-washington-post-sees-major-exodus-of-black-journalists/>

“Newspapers are cutting their editorial boards. This journalist says it’s a ‘chicken’ move”

<https://www.kjzz.org/the-show/2025-09-04/newspapers-are-cutting-their-editorial-boards-this-journalist-says-its-a-chicken-move>

Is getting fired from mainstream media a "badge of honor"?

<https://karenattiah.substack.com/p/is-getting-fired-from-mainstream>

- Hiring and firing
- Diversity on an editorial board—what is it and why is it important?
- Guest speaker TBA (Karen Attiah?)
- Write a 500-word reflection paper on how you think diversity on an editorial board is important—if at all. Is it even important in 2025? Why or why not?

**Week 12 (March 31):** Pitching/Introduction of Final Project

- Writing query emails (bad examples)
- What makes a proper, professional query?
- Introduction of Final Project
- Final Project packet** (pitch email, first draft, revised draft with Track Changes on, final “clean” draft with headline and subhead) all due April 17

**Week 13 (April 7): Final Project Part 1**

- In class, discuss the potential subject of your opinion column. (Note: no changes of ideas allowed after April 12.) Why is this particular issue important to you? How will you go about discussing it? What makes your opinion so interesting?
- First draft (approximately 800 words) due April 13 at noon for instructor feedback.
- Breakout sessions to work on revising second drafts.

-Guest speaker TBA.

### **Week 14 (April 14): Final Project Part 2 (Revision)/Satirical Journalism**

-Group activity critique of final project 1st draft.

-Humorous opinion pieces

-Work on 2nd draft with track changes on. (Remember, final packet requires the 1st draft, the edited version with track changes on and the final “clean” version.)

**Assignment:** Write a short (300–500-word) humorous or satirical op-ed.

**Assignment:** Final Project packet due April 17

### **Week 15 (April 21): Wrapup**

-Group work: Critique of one another’s Final Projects. What worked? What didn’t?

-How might you use what you’ve learned, even if not at a newspaper editorial department?

-Final thoughts.

## **Attendance Policy**

Regular attendance and participation in classes are essential for success in and are completion requirements for courses at UFL. A student’s failure to meet attendance requirements as specified in course descriptions will normally result in a non-satisfactory grade.

- In general, missing more than 20% of a course due to absences, lateness or early departures may jeopardize a student’s ability to earn a satisfactory final grade.
- Attending an on-ground or synchronous course means a student appeared in the live classroom for at least a meaningful portion of a given class meeting. Attending an online course means a student posted a discussion forum response, completed a quiz or attempted some other academically required activity. Simply viewing a course item or module does not count as attendance.
- Meeting the minimum attendance requirement for a course does not mean a student has satisfied the academic requirements for participation, which require students to go above and beyond simply attending a portion of the class. Faculty members will individually determine what constitutes participation in each course they teach and explain in their course descriptions how participation factors into a student’s final grade.

One unexcused absence is permitted per semester. Any additional unexcused absences outside of documented emergencies will result in a deduction from your total attendance score.

## Participation Expectations

For online courses, your “attendance” is measured by your **active** participation in the Canvas discussions and Zoom meetings. For Canvas postings (if required), your initial posting to the Canvas forum, based on the week’s prompt, will be due by Thursday at 11:59pm EST and should be between 250 and 500 words. There is no “maximum” word ceiling, but think of this forum as a conversation rather than a monologue. I too will participate in these discussions, and may even ask questions of poster or responder that might help as a starting point for your own responses to others. (This also allows me to monitor participation throughout the week.)

## Missing & Late Work Policy

### Deadlines

You are to respond to three classmates by 11:59 p.m. on Monday evening. As with initial posts, responses should be “substantive”—simply saying “I agree” or “I feel you’re wrong” are not enough; you must **explain** your thoughts and arguments. Keep the conversation moving forward, and be mindful of “netiquette” as failing to do so will negatively affect your grade.

Written assignments are typically due by Monday at 10pm. Your grade will drop by a letter for each consecutive day a paper is late. Plan ahead. If you absolutely cannot hit a deadline due to circumstances, please come to me to discuss.

### Lateness or minimal participation effects on discussion grade:

As outlined in the course documents, if you know you will not make a deadline, for the Canvas forum or turning in assignments for any reason, please message me to make alternate arrangements. “Unexcused” lateness for written assignments will result in a drop in grade for each day the assignment is not turned in.

For Canvas discussions, see the grading rubric for more information on lateness and inadequate work. The lowest “possible” score is zero, which is the same as turning in no work at all. Marks of “1” indicate minimal effort on your initial post and/or in your responses to your classmates. Remember, you must respond to at least three of your classmates in order to achieve the full 10 points. This means in

theory you could write an outstanding initial post and score a 5 but still get a zero on your response grade if you do not respond to anyone else at all.

#### **Excused absences:**

Life happens, emergencies arise. Come to me directly if you know you will miss class or a deadline due to such circumstances. While I won't require "evidence," if the requests become excessive I may ask for supporting documentation.

## **Accessibility Services for Students with Disabilities:**

UFL strives to mitigate barriers to course access for students with documented disabilities. To learn more about accommodations, please visit <https://elearning.ufl.edu/instructor-help/teaching-and-learning-tools/tool-finder/items/ally.html>.

## **Academic Integrity**

UFL has a commitment to honesty and excellence in academic work and expects the same from all students. Academic dishonesty, or cheating, can occur whenever you present—as your own work—something that you did not do. You can also be guilty of cheating if you help someone else cheat. Being unaware of what constitutes academic dishonesty (such as knowing what plagiarism is) does not absolve a student of the responsibility to be honest in his/her academic work. Academic dishonesty is taken very seriously and may lead to dismissal from the College. Plagiarism is also the single biggest no-no in journalism, and will not be tolerated in the classroom—and certainly not in the professional field.

***Course description details subject to change. Please refer to this document frequently.***

### **DEADLINES**

Journalism is a deadline-oriented business. The news is put out despite weather, natural disaster, staff turnover or, even in extreme cases, even violent acts such as an [active shooter at a newsroom](#) (the Annapolis Gazette still got the following morning's paper!).



## ACADEMIC DISHONESTY/HONOR CODE

Academic dishonesty of any kind will not be tolerated in this course. Violation of the honor code includes plagiarizing material from other sources, using artificial intelligence (such as ChatGPT), fabricating material or using any work done by another person for a class assignment. Even copying photos from the internet could lead to a copyright claim in the real world. See the Department of Journalism website, as well as UF guidelines, for specific outline of honor code violations.

UF Student Honor Code: <https://sccr.dso.ufl.edu/process/student-conduct-code/>

Any violations of this code will be reported to the Dean of Students. Failure to comply with this commitment will result in disciplinary action compliant with the UF Student Honor Code Procedures.

If you have any degree of uncertainty, please ask.

## CLASSROOM NEEDS

Students requesting special classroom needs must first register with the Dean of Students Office, which will provide documentation to the student, who must then provide the documentation to the instructor.

## STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities requesting accommodations should first register with the Disability Resource Center (352-392-8565, [www.dso.ufl.edu/drc](http://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc)) by providing appropriate documentation.

Once registered, students will receive an accommodation letter that must be presented to the instructor when requesting accommodation. Students with disabilities should follow this process as early as possible in the semester.

## COURSE EVALUATIONS

Students are expected to provide feedback on the quality of instruction in this course based on a minimum of 10 criteria. These evaluations are conducted online here. Evaluations are typically

open during the last three weeks of the semester, but announcements will be made giving specific times when they are open. Summary results of these evaluations are available to students at the evaluations website URL above. Course Grading Students will be graded in accordance with UF policies for assigning grade points as articulated here in this link.

## U MATTER, WE CARE

Your well-being is important to the University of Florida. The U Matter, We Care initiative is committed to creating a culture of care on our campus by encouraging members of our community to look out for one another and to reach out for help if a member of our community is in need. If you or a friend is in distress, please contact [umatter@ufl.edu](mailto:umatter@ufl.edu) so that the U Matter, We Care Team can reach out to the student in distress. A nighttime and weekend crisis counselor is available by phone at 352-392-1575. The U Matter, We Care Team can help connect students to the many other helping resources available including, but not limited to, Victim Advocates, Housing staff, and the Counseling and Wellness Center. Please remember that asking for help is a sign of strength. In case of emergency, call 9-1-1.

## THE INSTRUCTOR

Eric Althoff is the Emmy-winning co-writer of the documentaries "[The Red River Flood](#)" and "[The Town That Disappeared Overnight](#)," and producer of the Telly-winning shorts "[My Hatton](#)" and "[The Long Hair](#)" for Media 523. Eric's past work includes copy editor on the opinion desk of the Washington Post, entertainment and lifestyle editor at the Washington Times, adjunct professor of writing at the Community College of Vermont and writer for the public relations firm Promova based in Maitland, Florida. His writing has appeared in the Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Minneapolis Star-Tribune, Napa Valley Register, Luxe Getaways, DCist, Black Belt, Alchemical Records and elsewhere. Eric has lectured several times at the annual conference of ACES: The Society for Editing, and moderated panels for the DC/DOX festival, held in Washington, D.C., and for the Fredericksburg Film Festival. Eric lives in Fredericksburg, Virginia, with his wife, Victoria.