



GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
School of Continuing Studies
Journalism

MPJO-765-01: COVERING CAPITOL HILL

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY: MPS-JOURNALISM

Thursdays, 8 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. | Spring 2015

Instructor: Paul Singer

Georgetown Downtown, Room C122

- Office hours are by appointment.

COURSE OVERVIEW

The course is designed to have each student serve as a mock congressional correspondent for a specific publication. You will be assigned a “beat” for the semester, and in general your assignments will be expected to reflect that beat. The theme of this course is that how you cover Capitol Hill depends entirely upon who your audience is.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

By the end of the semester, students will:

- Have an understanding of how legislation moves in Congress
- Have experience covering congressional news events
- Understand the notion of covering a beat for a particular audience
- Be able to produce a daily news story about a congressional event

REQUIRED READING

There is one primary text for this course, “Congress from the Inside,” which is sold at the university bookstore, on Amazon.com and through other booksellers.

Title: Congress from the Inside: Observations from the Majority and the Minority

Author: Sherrod Brown

ISBN: 0873387929

Publisher: Kent State University Press

Edition: Third

Year: 2004

Price (Amazon): \$28

You will also need a Congressional directory (or facebook), which is available at almost any bookstore in Washington for about \$15. There are also now smartphone apps that provide the same information, and other on-line sources, but I like the books.

It would also be to your advantage to buy an AP style manual. You may also access it online through Georgetown’s library for free. Your papers will be graded using AP style, which has become the default style for most journalism outlets. Familiarity with AP style will be useful to you in any further journalism pursuit.



ATTENDANCE

Punctual attendance is critical. If you have to miss a class – for a family emergency, medical emergency or other act of God – you must let me know IN ADVANCE and work out a proposal for making up whatever work you will miss. Exceptions will be made only in extraordinary circumstances.

Missing more than two classes will result in a final grade reduction of one level (for example, an A will be converted to an A-). **Absences for classes, beyond the initial two, will result in further reduction of the final grade.** If you are absent for more than four classes, you will be in danger of failing this course.

CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE AND OTHER GUIDELINES

Students should turn off all cell phones, pagers or other communication devices while in class. Class discussions should be respectful and considerate of others' views and opinions.

All quotes and sources used in your stories must be real. The instructor will periodically and randomly check sources and quotes to make sure they are accurate.

Deadlines for each assignment will be strictly enforced. ANY ASSIGNMENT SUBMITTED AFTER THE DEADLINE WILL BE REJECTED AND WILL BE RECORDED AS A ZERO.

In the event of a weather emergency (or any other widespread emergency) that would close the Georgetown Downtown building during one of our in-class sessions, we will plan to meet virtually through online videoconferencing tools. More information will be provided on how this will work later in the semester.

ASSIGNMENTS

In this class, you will produce three writing assignments as well as turn in weekly story ideas to your instructor from your beat.

Writing assignments should be filed as Word documents and attached to an email to your instructor, according to the deadlines indicated below:

1. Write a 500-600 word story about a piece of legislation. What would the legislation accomplish? Is it likely to pass? What would it mean to your readership if it became law? Why should your readers care about this bill? Include quotes from supporters and opponents. Read the bill. Does the bill actually do what the supporters and opponents say it would do?

DEADLINE: Beginning of class, January 29

OPTIONAL REWRITE DEADLINE: Beginning of class, February 12



2. Cover a hearing or mark-up and write a 500-600 word story about what happened. What is the importance of the hearing/mark-up and will it lead to legislation? Why should your readers care about this event? What is the most significant thing that happened? For this assignment, keep in mind that you will be dependent on the schedule of congressional activity. You are better off scheduling your coverage around an event or a piece of legislation that is moving instead of waiting for the assignment deadline. Early bird, and all that.

DEADLINE: Beginning of class, February 26

OPTIONAL REWRITE DEADLINE: Beginning of class, March 19

3. Final project: Write a 1,200-1,500 word story for the "front page" of your news outlet (paper/website/broadcast) about something happening in Congress.

DEADLINE: Beginning of class, April 16

MANDATORY REWRITE DEADLINE: 9 a.m. on May 7

For each assignment, you will be required to turn in paper copies of press releases, handouts and other materials used in assembling stories, including contact information for a source you spoke with. That person will have to be able to confirm to the instructor that you spoke. The instructor will spot-check facts, quotes, spellings, etc., in your stories.

No late work will be accepted, as referenced above in the Class Guidelines area.

Weekly story ideas:

For each class meeting, students will be expected to bring three story ideas within their beats. We will have a story meeting in each class to talk about how those stories could be developed. You will not be called upon to share your story ideas in every class, but in each class a few students will be called upon, and everyone will be called upon to share story ideas a few times during the semester. These must be filed by e-mail to your instructor by the beginning of class each week.

GRADING

Your course grade will be based on the following:

Participation/attendance:	10%
Story ideas/story meetings:	20%
Legislation story:	20%
Hearing story:	20%
Final project:	30%
Total:	100%



Assignments will be downgraded for grammatical, spelling and style errors. ANY ASSIGNMENT CONTAINING A FACTUAL ERROR – THAT IS, ANY ERROR THAT WOULD REQUIRE A CORRECTION IN THE NEWSPAPER – WILL RECEIVE A ZERO.

Each written assignment gets a numeric grade, 1-5, and a similar numeric grade is assigned for overall participation and story ideas. At the end of the semester the numbers are multiplied by the relevant factor and added together to provide a final total for each student. The highest score in the class is considered 100 percent.

Graduate course grades include A, A-, B+, B, B-, C and F. **There are no grades of C+, C- or D.**

A	100-93	B-	82-80
A-	92-90	C	79-70
B+	89-88	F	69-0
B	87-83		

The instructor will provide a warning by mid-semester to any student who appears to be on track for a poor final grade.

For each writing assignment, I have provided a deadline and a rewrite deadline. Each assignment will be thoroughly edited and graded. If you would like to submit a rewrite for extra credit, you may do so, by the deadline provided. Rewrites are optional, except for the final project. Extra credit projects can add as much as one point to the total grade for that assignment. For example, an assignment that received a 3 can come up to a 4 if the extra credit assignment is completed properly. A rewrite of the final project is mandatory, and your grade for the final will be based on execution of both the initial submission and the rewrite. The total grade for the final will be the average of the initial submission and the rewritten submission.

UNIVERSITY RESOURCES

Georgetown offers a variety of support systems for students that can be accessed on main campus or at the downtown location:

- MPS Writing Resource Program
202-687-4246
<http://writingcenter.georgetown.edu/>
- Academic Resource Center
202-687-8354 | arc@georgetown.edu
<http://ldss.georgetown.edu/>
- Counseling and Psychiatric Services



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202-687-6985

<http://caps.georgetown.edu/>

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES POLICY

Students with documented disabilities have the right to specific accommodations that do not fundamentally alter the nature of the course. Students with disabilities should contact the Academic Resource Center (202-687-8354; arc@georgetown.edu; <http://ldss.georgetown.edu/index.cfm>) before the start of classes to allow time to review the documentation and make recommendations for appropriate accommodations. If accommodations are recommended, you will be given a letter from ARC to share with your professors. You are personally responsible for completing this process officially and in a timely manner. Neither accommodations nor exceptions to policies can be permitted to students who have not completed this process in advance.

GEORGETOWN HONOR SYSTEM

All students are expected to maintain the highest standards of academic and personal integrity in pursuit of their education at Georgetown. Academic dishonesty in any form is a serious offense, and students found in violation are subject to academic penalties that include, but are not limited to, failure of the course, termination from the program, and revocation of degrees already conferred. All students are held to the Honor Code. The Honor Code pledge follows:

In the pursuit of the high ideals and rigorous standards of academic life, I commit myself to respect and uphold the Georgetown University Honor System: To be honest in any academic endeavor, and To conduct myself honorably, as a responsible member of the Georgetown community, as we live and work together.

PLAGIARISM

Stealing someone else's work is a terminal offense in journalism, and it will wreck your career in academia, too. Students are expected to work with integrity and honesty in all their assignments. The Georgetown University Honor System defines plagiarism as "the act of passing off as one's own the ideas or writings of another." More guidance is available through the Gervase Programs at <http://gervaseprograms.georgetown.edu/honor/system/53377.html>. If you have any doubts about plagiarism, paraphrasing and the need to credit, check out <http://www.plagiarism.org>.

SYLLABUS MODIFICATION

The syllabus may change to accommodate discussion of emerging topics. Also, the schedules of guest speakers may require some shifting of our agenda. The instructor will make every effort to provide as much advance notice as possible for any alterations.



CLASS SCHEDULE

WEEK 1 (THURSDAY, JANUARY 8)

- Introductions
- Explanation of class assignments, grading
- Beats
- What does it mean to “cover Congress”
- How to figure out what is going on in your beat
- THOMAS, etc.

Assignment: Three story ideas, emailed to instructor

Deadline: Beginning of class, January 15

WEEK 2 (THURSDAY, JANUARY 15)

- Story meeting
- What does Congress do?
- How many bills pass?
- The NEW Congress
- The Braley Case

Assignment: Three story ideas, emailed to instructor

Deadline: Beginning of class, January 22

WEEK 3 (THURSDAY, JANUARY 22)

- Story meeting
- “I’m just a Bill...”
- Process chart
- Where are the newsworthy moments?
- What’s a mark-up? Does it matter anymore?
- Who matters most in Congress?
- Who matters most to YOUR readers?
- Newswriting 101

Assignment: Legislation story, emailed to instructor as Word attachment; three story ideas, emailed to instructor

Deadline: Beginning of class, January 29

WEEK 4 (THURSDAY, JANUARY 29)

- Story meeting
- Passing a bill

Assignment: Three story ideas, emailed to instructor



Deadline: Beginning of class, February 5

WEEK 5 (THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 5)

- Story meeting
- How (not) to write a hearing story
- Outside Congress
- Who knows/who tells
- Interest groups, lobbyists, courts, staffers, activists
- States and local gov.
- Think tanks, experts, academe

Assignment: Optional rewrite of legislation story, emailed to instructor as a Word attachment; three story ideas, emailed to instructor

Deadline: Beginning of class, February 12

WEEK 6 (THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 12)

- Story meeting
- How government works
- The UGG boot scenario
- Congress
- Courts
- Administration
- How Congress meddles in the other branches
- Oversight

Assignment: Three story ideas, emailed to instructor

Deadline: Beginning of class, February 19

WEEK 7 (THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 19)

- Story meeting
- Follow the money
- Campaign cash
- Appropriations
- Personal financial disclosure
- Disbursements
- The Doug Scofield story

Assignment: Finish reading “Congress from the Inside”

Deadline: Beginning of class, February 21



WEEK 8 (SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 21)

- We will have a book club discussion about “Congress from the Inside” from 9:30 a.m. to noon.

Assignment: Hearing story, attached as a Word document in an email to instructor

Deadline: Beginning of class, February 26

WEEK 9 (THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 26)

- Lobbying
- Guest speaker: TBD

Assignment: Three story ideas, emailed to instructor

Deadline: Beginning of class, March 5

WEEK 10 (THURSDAY, MARCH 5)

- Story meeting
- Politics
- Campaigns
- Leadership
- Caucuses

Assignment: Optional rewrite of hearing story, attached as a Word document in an email to instructor; three story ideas, emailed to instructor

Deadline: Beginning of class, March 19

THURSDAY, MARCH 12 – NO CLASS (SPRING BREAK)

WEEK 11 (THURSDAY, MARCH 19)

- Story meeting
- Investigations
- The Blogs
- Opposition Research
- The wall between campaigns and official resources

WEEK 12 (THURSDAY, MARCH 26)

- Guest speaker: Member of Congress

Assignment: Three story ideas, emailed to instructor

Deadline: Beginning of class, April 9



NO CLASS ON THURSDAY, APRIL 2 FOR EASTER BREAK

WEEK 13 (THURSDAY, APRIL 9)

- Story meeting
- Ethics – theirs and ours
- Office of Congressional Ethics v. Ethics Committee
- The “ethics complaint” story
- The Paul Singer story

Assignment: Final project, attached as a Word document in an email to instructor

Deadline: Beginning of class, April 16

WEEK 14 (THURSDAY, APRIL 16)

- What does a congressional correspondent do all day?
- Guest speaker: TBD

WEEK 15 (THURSDAY, APRIL 23)

- Get a job
- Who covers Congress?
- The death of the Washington bureau
- Bloomberg/PoliticoPRO/IWP

Assignment: Mandatory rewrite of final paper, attached as a Word document in an email to instructor

Deadline: 9 a.m., May 7