

The University of Western Ontario

Faculty of Information and Media Studies

MIT 3835G: Blogs, Columns and Op ed: Making Opinions Matter

Winter 2021

Instructor: Dan Brown

My office: I won't be maintaining an office with regular office hours on campus this semester. Since I work full-time off-campus, you would be unlikely to bump into me by chance on campus anyway.

Virtual office hours: I check my UWO e-mail frequently, so contact me by e-mail and I will get back to you as quickly as possible. I can often give you very precise feedback by e-mail fairly swiftly. We can also arrange a one-one-one virtual session on Zoom if that's what you require.

My E-mail: dbrown84@uwo.ca

Room: This is an online/distance studies course

Class time: Tuesdays 1:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. from January 12 to April 6

Class format: Synchronous weekly discussions

Owl site information: <https://owl.uwo.ca/portal/site/b262be3e-407e-4511-91d7-a727a2532526>

Technology requirements: You will need access to a laptop with a reliable internet connection; Zoom will be our primary tool for discussions each week, including the chat function.

NOTE: Remote learning sessions for this course will be recorded. The data captured during these recordings may include your image, voice recordings, chat logs and personal identifiers (name displayed on the screen). The recordings will be used for educational purposes related to this course, including evaluations. The recordings may be disclosed to other individuals under special circumstances. Please contact the instructor if you have any concerns related to session recordings.

ALSO NOTE: If you are taking this class remotely from another country or another location within Canada, the requirements and expectations for this course do not change depending on where you are or what time zone you are in.

Course outline

The purpose of this course is to help students become proficient at writing different types of opinion pieces, from columns to blog posts to editorials to reviews and more. It is based on the premise that the internet is an opinion medium -- when web surfers go online, one of the things they search for is informed commentary on the issues of the day. But there is a difference between simple ranting and a reasoned argument. Every week, we will look at several sample pieces written by working journalists and examine the strategies they use to make their points. We will ask: Which rhetorical strategies should be emulated, which avoided?

Students who complete this course:

- *Will understand the function of each type of opinion pieces.
- *Will be able, as self-reliant writers, to generate original ideas for their own writing.
- *Will recognize the multiple different ways to be convincing on paper, that is, rhetorical strategies.
- *Will become adept at making convincing pitches to editors
- *Will learn strategies for composing opinion pieces in a hurry.
- *Will appreciate the journalistic separation of church and state – that is, how reporting differs from columnizing, reviewing, et cetera.
- *Will learn how to deal with reader feedback and develop a philosophical framework for approving reader comments online

Course objectives:

Using real-life examples as a template and our own discussions as a springboard, students will produce a number of their own opinion pieces in order to (a) gain as much opinion-writing experience as possible and (b) develop a personal theory of rhetoric.

The emphasis will be on learning how opinion pieces are constructed, but to support this goal we will also discuss a number of related topics, including but not limited to (a) generating ideas for arguments (b) when to apply which rhetorical device and (c) what it means to take a stand on paper.

Course structure/Course materials:

Class members will be responsible for doing the readings in advance for each class. These readings will be posted via Owl or mailed to you each week via Owl. It's your responsibility to

become familiar with these readings so our time together each week is fruitful; being an informed participant in class will be vital to the success of this course, as well as to your enjoyment of the topics covered.

Attendance in each online lecture is MANDATORY. If you miss a class, you're responsible to make up the material. I teach each class only once.

NOTE: Class members are expected to keep themselves informed about the biggest stories in the news for the duration of the course. You should be familiar with the most important political, business, arts and sports stories of the day to get the most out of our time together. For purposes of our discussions, you are expected to be well-versed in current events until the conclusion of the course.

Statement on Academic Offences

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site: http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf

Plagiarism: Students must write their essays and assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea, or a passage from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. Plagiarism is a major academic offence.

All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com (<http://www.turnitin.com>).

Computer-marked multiple-choice tests and/or exams may be subject to submission for similarity review by software that will check for unusual coincidences in answer patterns that may indicate cheating.

Students are also forbidden, under any circumstances, from fabricating quotes, sources or details in their stories. If a student is found to have fabricated ANY part of an assignment, that assignment will receive an automatic grade of 0. Such fabrications can be considered an academic offence and will jeopardize your status in the program. Possible punishments include a grade of 0 for the course and removal from the program.

Scalping of quotations from other sources is prohibited. Scalping is taking quotations from interviews conducted by other reporters and passing them off as your own, therefore the quotations you use in your assignments MUST BE FROM YOUR OWN INTERVIEWS.

If you are having any difficulties determining what may be considered plagiarism or inappropriate use of source material, please come and discuss the matter with me before including such details in a story.

Schedule of classes, topics covered and assignments

January 12

Go over course outline

January 19

Introduction to opinion writing: What does it mean to take a stand? What is the difference between ranting and reason? Are all opinions valid?

Generating story ideas

What is a hook?

January 26

Writing reviews

How to pitch story ideas

February 2

Writing reviews

February 9

Writing columns

Review assignment due

February 16

Reading week Feb. 13 to 21

February 23

Writing columns

The life of a columnist

March 2

Writing editorials

How editorial boards function

Column assignment due

March 9

Writing editorials

March 16

Writing blog posts

Editorial assignment due

March 23

Writing blog posts

March 30

Writing blog posts; other types of online writing

April 6

Comment moderation

How to deal with haters

Blogging assignment due

The topics to be discussed may change, depending on what big stories break during the semester. Whenever possible, I will give the class advance warning as circumstances warrant.

Some suggested resources to keep up with current events

Some information/opinion sources:

Arts Journal, found at artsjournal.com

bbc.com/news

cnn.com

The Daily Show

Entertainment Weekly, found at ew.com

The Globe and Mail, found at theglobeandmail.com

The Hollywood Reporter, found at hollywoodreporter.com

The London Free Press, found online at lfpres.com

msnbc.com

National Post, found at nationalpost.com

politico.com

realclearpolitics.com

Rolling Stone, found at rollingstone.com

Slate magazine, found at slate.com

The Toronto Star, found at thestar.com

USA Today, found at usatoday.com

The Wall Street Journal

Grading

Your final grade will be determined as follows:

Participation in class: worth 10 per cent of final grade (although attendance is mandatory, this is NOT an attendance mark; see remarks on participation criteria)

Review assignment: worth 20 per cent of final grade, due February 9

Column assignment: worth 20 per cent of final grade, due March 2

Editorial assignment: worth 20 per cent of final grade, due March 16

Blogging assignment: worth 30 per cent of final grade, due April 6

NOTE: Every article written for this course must have an identifiable news hook or peg. You must get your topic approved before you begin. This can be done by e-mail, or in class. Pitches do not have to be elaborate and should be as pointed as possible eg. "I want to write a column on . . . this is timely because . . ."

I WILL NOT ACCEPT ASSIGNMENTS THAT HAVE NOT BEEN PITCHED AND APPROVED BEFORE YOU START WRITING

Before each assignment is due, I will send out a summary sheet of specific requirements, including a reminder of the due date, word count, and other details.

Late policy

Late policy: A paper that is one day late will receive a 10 per cent penalty. This increases to 20 per cent on the second day and 30 per cent on the third. Papers more than three days late will not be accepted and will receive a mark of 0.

An additional note: MIT Grading Policy - see Notes from the Dean's Office at the end of the syllabus From the Academic Handbook (S.1664)

As a guideline for departments (or faculties where applicable), assigned work will be distributed in such a way that approximately half way through the course the student will receive an estimate of their standing in the course. If you want an estimate of your standing before then (or at any time during the semester), please contact me and we can discuss an alternative arrangement.

Students will receive graded work worth no less than 15% at least 3 days prior to the deadline for withdrawal without academic penalty. This year, the date by which students are to have received at least 15% of their grade in a first semester course is March 12, 2021. Students can find details about this academic policy here:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/exam/evaluation_undergrad.pdf. Please note, students are responsible for ensuring that they are aware of the grades they have received in their courses.

Please note, students who receive academic accommodation for the assignments on which these grades are based may not receive feedback in time to meet this deadline. Instructors and TAs are responsible for making available graded work to the student prior to the deadline;

students are responsible for ensuring that they are aware of the grades they have received in their courses.

Participation criteria

Grade range

100-90: You always participate in depth, offering insightful comments on the assigned readings; you participate every week in the chats, by email to me, and on Zoom. This is a student who uses every tool available for participation and is a leader in the class.

80-90: You speak every week, make significant contributions most weeks using the chat, emails and Zoom, and clearly know the readings.

70-80: You usually participate in depth using the tools available and know the readings, but are silent some of the time.

60-70: You make at least one relevant brief attempt at contributing to our discussions each week.

50-60: You make a relevant brief attempt at contributing most weeks.

40-50: You make a few brief attempts at contributing and are silent most of the time

Below 40: You never contribute OR I don't have any idea who you are OR you don't pay attention during our time together on Zoom and you maintain silence online. As such, you will be considered MENTALLY ABSENT.

Attendance in the Zoom discussion is MANDATORY each Wednesday

For the first class missed, 5% will be deducted from the student's participation grade

For the second class missed, 10% will be deducted from the student's participation grade

And so on, at a rate of an additional 5% per class missed

NOTE: THE PARTICIPATION PORTION OF YOUR FINAL GRADE IS NOT AN ATTENDANCE MARK.

Please don't confuse the two. Participation is not important as an end in itself; it's important to the extent that being present is a prerequisite to participating in our discussions.

If you are uncomfortable contributing virtually and sharing your thoughts, you should re- think your decision to take this course. By not participating, you deny not only yourself a chance to learn, but you also deny your classmates the opportunity to learn from you.

NOTES FROM THE FIMS DEAN'S OFFICE

Winter 2021

Rights and Responsibilities

The conditions governing a student's ability to pursue their undergraduate education at Western are ratified by Senate and can be found on the Academic Policies section of the University Secretariat:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/academic_policies/rights_responsibilities.html

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http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf

Plagiarism

Students must write their essays and assignments, including take-home exams, in their own words. Whenever students take an idea, or a passage from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. Plagiarism is a major academic offence. All papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software Turnitin under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system.

Accommodation Policies

Students with disabilities work with Accessible Education (formerly SSD) which provides recommendations for accommodation based on medical documentation or psychological and cognitive testing. The accommodation policy can be found here: [Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities](#)

Academic Consideration for Student Absence

Students will have two (2) opportunities during the regular academic year to use an on-line portal to self-report an absence during the term, provided the following conditions are met: the absence is no more than 48 hours in duration, and the assessment

for which consideration is being sought is worth 30% or less of the student's final grade. Students are expected to contact their instructors within 24 hours of the end of the period of the self-reported absence, unless noted on the syllabus. Students are not able to use the self-reporting option in the following circumstances:

- during exam periods,
- absence of a duration greater than 48 hours,
- assessments worth more than 30% of the student's final grade,
- if a student has already used the self-reporting portal twice during the academic year

If the conditions for a Self-Reported Absence are NOT met, students will need to provide a Student Medical Certificate or equivalent documentation, if the absence is medical, or provide appropriate documentation if there are compassionate grounds for the absence in question. Students are encouraged to contact the FIMS Undergraduate Student Services Office to obtain more information about the relevant documentation.

Students should also note that individual instructors are not permitted to receive documentation directly from a student, whether in support of an application for consideration on medical grounds, or for other reasons. **All documentation required for absences that are not covered by the Self-Reported Absence Policy must be submitted to the Academic Counselling office of a student's home Faculty.**

For Western University policy on Consideration for Student Absence, see [Policy on Academic Consideration For Student Absences - Undergraduate Students in First Entry Programs](#) and for the Student Medical Certificate (SMC), see: http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/medicalform.pdf

In the event of a Covid-19 resurgence, it is possible that different procedures may need to be put in place on short notice.

Religious Accommodation

Students should consult the University's list of recognized religious holidays, and should give reasonable notice in writing, prior to the holiday, to the Instructor and an Academic Counsellor if their course requirements will be affected by a religious observance. Additional information is given in the [Western Academic Calendar](#).

Grading at FIMS

- Normally, first year courses required for entry into an MIT or MPI module (MIT 1020E and MIT 1025F/G) are expected to have a course average between 68-72%.
- Normally, second year required courses (MIT 2000, 2100, 2200, 2500) are expected to have a course average between 70 and 75%.
- Normally, third year required courses (MIT 3000, 3100) are expected to have a course average between 72 and 77%.

Elective courses and 4th year seminars have no recommended course averages.

Support Services

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

<http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/>

SUPPORT SERVICES - LINKS

Office of the Registrar:

www.registrar.uwo.ca

Mental Health

Support:

<https://www.uwo.ca/health/psych/index.html>

Accessible Education:

http://academicsupport.uwo.ca/accessible_education/index.html

Accessibility

Information:

www.accessibility.uwo.ca/

Writing Support

Centre:

<http://writing.uwo.ca/>

Learning Skills

Services:

<https://www.uwo.ca/sdc/learning/>

Academic Learning and Support for Online Learning:

<https://www.uwo.ca/se/digital/types/academic-and-learning-support.html>

Indigenous Services:

<https://indigenous.uwo.ca/>

Western International:

<https://international.uwo.ca/>

Career Centre:

<http://careerexperience.uwo.ca/>

Appendix A: Suggested Grade Ranges in MIT, MPI and MTP

Guidelines to the MIT Grade Range

These guidelines are benchmarks, and are not to be followed as rigid regulations. They will be adjusted as appropriate to take into account the level of the course and any specific instructions given by a professor. As well, competency in English language usage (including spelling and grammar) may be taken into account in the assignment of grades by individual instructors. Note that the 70-79 grade range is broken into two divisions, as this is the grade range into which a large number of students fall.

90-100 (Outstanding, A+)

The report shows sparkling originality and exhibits a high degree of critical analysis of the topic. Sophisticated synthesis and analysis of the theoretical and conceptual dimensions of the topic are demonstrated. Mastery of complex material and ideas is immediately evident. The topic is treated with sensitivity and subtlety of thought. The quality of the writing and background research is exemplary.

80-89 (Excellent, A)

The report shows originality and exhibits a high degree of critical analysis of the topic; it gets to the heart of the matter with comments and/or questions. It is clearly focused and logically organized. The quality of writing makes the report immediately understandable. Mastery of complex material and ideas is demonstrated. The report is of appropriate length, while preserving the priorities and emphasis of the material, so that the result is meaningful, not simplistic.

75-79 (Very Good, B+)

The report shows above average analysis, critical thinking and independent thought. Claims are supported by ample evidence and the components of the topic are well-researched and presented. The topic is addressed in reasonable depth and/or breadth and covers material appropriate to the course. The analysis is organized around focal points and the argument is easily followed. The report demonstrates an above average ability to write in an intelligible style and to condense material meaningfully and with a concern for priorities of that material.

70-74 (Good, B)

The report shows an attempt at analysis and critical thinking. Claims are supported by reasonable evidence. The topic is addressed in some depth and/or breadth, with references to the appropriate literature and course material. The analysis is organized around focal points. The report is generally well written and well argued.

60-69 (Competent, C)

The report demonstrates adequate comprehension of the topic. The report is on topic and is a reasonable summary of material covered in the course, but goes no further. Facts are stated accurately; the quality of writing is sufficiently intelligible with enough elaboration and enough connections made between ideas to permit a reader to understand the point of the report.

50-59 (Marginal, D)

The report shows less than adequate comprehension of the topic and of the material covered by the course. The report is a less than adequate summary of sources and/or is considerably off-topic. Facts are stated inaccurately or ambiguously; the writing style is difficult to follow; there is insufficient elaboration to permit reader's comprehension of relations among ideas; little judgment is shown in selecting detail for inclusion in the report.

Below 50 (Unacceptable, F)

The report demonstrates a failure to comprehend the topic. The material is disorganized and unintelligible. The report clearly does not meet the minimal requirements of the assignment.

Appendix B: Guidelines of Academic Appeals for FIMS Students

Grounds for Appeal:

The Faculty of Information and Media Studies does not view the appeals process as an opportunity for students to solicit a second opinion on a grade assigned to a particular piece of work. Appeals must pertain to the final grade in a course, and will only be entertained if sufficient grounds for appeal can be met, including: medical or compassionate circumstances, a defect in the evaluation process, bias, inaccuracy or unfairness.

Stages in the Appeals Process:

The first stage of the process is a discussion of the disputed grade with the appropriate Teaching Assistant (if applicable), and subsequently, the course Instructor. For grades assigned to individual assignments, essays, lab reports, projects and tests completed throughout the term, the student first must appeal to the Teaching Assistant or Instructor of the course, within three weeks of the date on which the Instructor or Teaching Assistant returned the assignments to the class. The Appeals Committee will not hear any further appeals about the final grade in any course unless this first step has been taken.

If completion of the first stage has not resolved the matter, the student may appeal the final grade in the course to the FIMS Appeals Committee. Appeals of final grades must be **within the time frame indicated in the Undergraduate Calendar.** It is the student's responsibility to ensure that the appeal is submitted within the deadline. The student shall submit a formal letter to the FIMS Appeals Committee outlining the grounds for the appeal, the remedy sought and relevant materials including the information about when and with whom (Teaching Assistant and/or Instructor) the student met, as described in Stage 1. If the appeal involves a request for work to be regraded, the original marked work and a clean copy (if possible) must be included. If the appeal is commenced once the deadline has passed, it will not be considered either by the Appeals Committee or by the Associate Dean.

The FIMS Appeals Committee has the discretion to determine whether the grounds for appeal have been met.

If the Committee deems that the reasons for the appeal are not legitimate, the Associate Dean will be informed. The appeal will be terminated and the student will be informed.

If the Committee decides that the grounds for appeal have been met, the following steps will be taken:

1. the course Instructor will be shown the appeal letter and offered an opportunity to make a written response;
2. if work is to be regraded, a reader will be appointed who is competent in the area in question and was not involved in the assignment of the original mark. The reader will consider the work in question and will arrive at an independent evaluation. If there is a large discrepancy between the original mark and the regraded mark, a second reader may be appointed by the Committee. **If the appointed reader(s) arrive at a grade within five marks of the original, the original grade will stand.**

The FIMS Appeals Committee will review the evidence and will make a recommendation on the case to the Associate Dean Undergraduate.

The Associate Dean Undergraduate will consider the recommendation from the Appeals Committee, and will make a decision. The student and the instructor will be notified promptly and in writing by the Associate Dean of the decision and of the change in grade, if any. Within the Faculty of Information and Media Studies, the Associate Dean's decision on the matter is final.

Further appeals are possible under certain circumstances to the Senate Review Board Academic (for Undergraduate students) or to the Faculty of Graduate Studies (for Graduate students) but the student should carefully consult the guidelines regarding such Appeals.