

Reading The Newspaper

A.P. Simonds

To read the newspaper is the modern man's morning-prayer.

G.W.F. Hegel

Intermediate Seminars

Intermediate Seminars offer students with 30 or more credits the opportunity to work on essential university capabilities in small-sized courses that are often thematic or problem-oriented and interdisciplinary in nature. Designed in part to help students prepare for the Writing Proficiency Requirement, Intermediate Seminars put special emphasis on critical reading, thinking, and writing. They focus on other essential capabilities as appropriate to the course and might therefore include attention to library research and information technology, collaborative learning, oral presentation, and academic self-assessment. Students who practiced reading, writing and critical thinking in a First Year Seminar at UMass Boston will practice them at a more advanced level in the Intermediate Seminar.

Only ONE Intermediate Seminar may be taken for credit. If you have taken another G200-level course in any department at UMB, you cannot receive credit for this one.

Prerequisites: English 101, English 102, First Year Seminar (or waiver), and 30 credits. First Year Seminar is automatically waived for students who enter UMB with 30 or more transfer credits.

Student Referral Program. If it appears to the teacher that you might not pass this Intermediate Seminar, and if the instructor cannot figure out how to support your success in the course, the instructor might inform Dr. Elsa Casas, Director of the Student Referral Program (M-3-625; 287-5500). Dr. Casas or her staff would attempt to help you address the difficulties that are interfering with your success in the class. If you do not want your instructor to let the Student Referral Program know that you are having difficulty, please let your instructor know.

Assessment of these Courses. In addition to course evaluation forms that are routinely administered at the end of each course at UMass Boston, an assessment committee will look at randomly chosen student writing from Intermediate Seminars. Please save all your writing in this course so that if you are randomly chosen you will have your work available. The purpose of this is to improve the program and to improve particular courses, as necessary. You may remove your name from your papers if you choose to submit them anonymously.

Objectives of this Seminar

The newspaper is probably the most familiar and widely-used of all complex printed texts. Though it serves many different purposes (both sophisticated and trivial, high-minded and base), its most important role in a democratic society is to supply individuals the information they need to understand and make competent judgments about their world. By looking carefully at the way one of the world's top-ranked papers goes about its business on a daily basis, we'll seek to become more skillful, rigorous, efficient and critically self-aware readers.

The focus of our inquiry is neither *journalism* nor *current events and trends* as such, but the development of practical, "hands-on" skills for using the one to make sense of the other. Newspapers bring together elements of many different kinds of textual experience including narrative storytelling, historical documentation, social-scientific analysis, quantitative description, critical appraisal, polemic, propaganda, and entertainment. We'll consider how best to use, rather than be used by, all of these ways of depicting the world that surround us.

Reading Requirements

Substantial, intelligently-selected excerpts from *The New York Times*, February 4 through May 18, 2002; Monday through Saturday is required, Sunday recommended. (Guidelines for interpreting "substantial" and "intelligently-selected" will be discussed in class.) Procedures for securing home delivery at substantially reduced student rates will be explained in class. If delivery or billing problems arise, call 1-800-NYTIMES (1-800-698-4637).

In addition to the newspaper, students should obtain a copy of *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage*

Writing Requirements

There will be *six* graded writing assignments, and roughly a half-dozen short pass/fail exercises over the course of the term. Each of these assignments will be described more precisely on topic sheets to be distributed later.

1. *Identification and description* of properties distinguishing *The New York Times* from other sorts of text.
Length: 200-400 words.
Instructions to be distributed February 5.
Paper due February 12.
Revision due February 19.
2. *Interpretive Summary* of three articles.
Length: 100-150 words each.
Instructions to be distributed February 21.
First summary due February 26.
Second summary due March 5.
Three-summary package due March 12.
3. *Appraisal* of arguments presented in editorials, op-ed columns, or cultural criticism.
Length: 2-3 pages.
Instructions to be distributed March 14.
Paper due March 26.
Revision due April 4.
4. *Letter to the Editor*
Length: 100-300 words
Instructions to be distributed April 4.
Paper due April 16.
5. *Analysis* of a current issue.
Length: 5-6 pp.
Instructions to be distributed on April 18.
Topic proposal due April 23.
Paper due May 2.
Revision due May 14.
6. *Final Exam*.
Length: 7-10 paragraphs
Instructions to be distributed on May 14.
Exam to be scheduled by Registrar between May 20 and May 24.

Exercises (most of which will be completed in class) will be assigned on a regular basis.

Don't forget to save all of your written work (for the reason described in the boxed-off section at the top of this syllabus). A three-ring binder, expanding file, or other suitable "container" makes it easier to do this in an organized and systematic fashion. Aside from its potential benefit to the General Education Assessment Committee, I think you'll find this practice useful for your own purposes in the course.

Topical Outline

Because the primary texts for this course have not yet been written, it is difficult to specify precisely the ground we shall cover. It is possible, however, to describe several overarching themes; we will draw on as many of them as time permits.

1. Why newspapers?

The advantages/disadvantages of the daily paper (compared to television, radio, news periodicals, books, on-line services, etc.) as the main source of political information; public opinion data on news-source preferences; background on the nature of the news business and recent trends within it.

2. Reading strategies

Understanding layout; recognizing (and using) editorial judgments regarding the relative importance of and connections between different events; using news indices and summaries; the significance of bylines; general strategies for handling a text designed more as collage than as a linear document.

3. Reporting

The structure of news reports; the relationship between "event" and "report"; conventions defining "objective" journalism; news "report" vs. news "analysis"; the relationship between reporter and editor; distinguishing between (and dealing with) personal, structural, and non-journalistic news bias; making connections --between one event and another, and between today's report and yesterday's; newspaper archives and the historical record.

4. Evidence

The nature, vicissitudes, and ultimate importance of "facts"; identifying and appraising sources (experts, officials, spokespersons, participants); on- vs. off-the-record sources; comparison of journalistic and academic conventions respecting documentation; the relationship between journalists and news-providers (press offices, private "news releases," public relations); the evidence of images (photojournalism); techniques for appraising, checking, testing claims; the benefits (and the limits) of the *cui bono* documents, and archives as backup tools; attending to the "correction and amplification" section.

5. Interpreting Quantitative Data

Problems of scale (how big is a billion?); the importance of identifying the different senses attached to "average," "mean," or "median" and of properly distinguishing a rate from a value, a constant from a current dollar, a continuous trend from a collection of discrete variables; reading charts and tables; the use and abuse of graphics to display quantitative information; making sense of statistics; data-checking resources (such as the *Statistical Abstract of the U.S.*) and how to use them.

6. Opinion and Controversy

Interpreting "opinion" pieces: editorials, columns, op ed contributions, and letters; ways debate enhances and/or obstructs understanding; the difference between "having" an opinion (easy) and justifying it (not easy!); self-reflection and the capacity for doubt; techniques of political argument: how to listen, deal with emotion (ours and theirs), distinguish explanation from blame, marshal evidence effectively; the importance (tactical and substantive) of finding the *strength* of your opponent's viewpoint.

7. The Future of Newspapers

Is there one? Print vs. electronic production and distribution; "personal" (individually-tailored) news packages; the tug-of-war between word and image; the "information superhighway"; the promise (and threat) of universal broadband cable hookups; the future of print and literacy.

Participation

This is a *seminar*, which means that your contributions are essential to the success of the class. Regular attendance is therefore one of the course requirements and more than three absences will begin to have a negative effect on the participation portion of your grade. I do understand that circumstances sometimes arise which make attendance impossible. In such a case there is no need to offer me any explanation; just be sure to stay within your allotment and to assure (via contact with other members of the class) that you are aware of what you've missed.

Some of our interaction will take place in the "virtual" space made available by the World Wide Web, using a Web browser (such as Internet Explorer or Netscape Navigator) and electronic mail. Some of you will already be familiar with these tools, but they are not presupposed by the course: you can learn them here. If you do not already have an e-mail account, call (617) 287-6223 for assistance in establishing one.

Grading

The components of your course grade will be weighed as follows:

The higher of the *Identification* and *Interpretive Summary* assignments = 15%

The lower of the *Identification* and *Interpretive Summary* assignments = 5%

The *Appraisal of Views* assignment = 10%

The *Letter to the Editor* = 10%¹

The higher of the *Comparative Analysis* and the *Final Exam* = 20%

The lower of the *Comparative Analysis* and the *Final Exam* = 10%

Timely completion of exercises, class participation, and organization of final portfolio = 30%

Support

Office hours (in Wheatley 5/092): Tuesdays & Thursdays, 4:00 - 5:00 p.m.; Fridays by appointment.

Office phone number, with voice mail: (617) 287-6932; E-mail address: rusty.simonds@umb.edu

Late Work

When I ask students requesting extension of an assignment deadline why they need it, a common response is "so I can do a better job." This answer shows why extensions and fairness are so difficult to reconcile. To offer the opportunity to "do a better job" to some students is to penalize others who work within the original, briefer time period.

In an effort to level the playing field, a late submission (which you should do your best to avoid!) will be held to a higher standard in compensation for the advantage of the extra time. 1% point will be subtracted from an assignment grade for each extra day you devote to it, up to a maximum diminution of 20%. In circumstances in which the late assignment submitter gains further advantage --for example, from class discussion of the results-- an additional adjustment may be necessary. This policy does *not* apply to the various exercises, which must be submitted on time to earn credit toward your grade.

I strongly recommend that you do everything possible to avoid an INC since it will diminish your overall course grade (as described above). A makeup final exam, moreover, will be difficult to schedule. If you are nonetheless forced to take this route, you must (a) notify me on or before the date of the Final; (b) complete a CAS Incomplete Request Form (available in most Departmental Offices, including Political Science) and get my signature on it before the end of the Final Exam period; (c) schedule any required makeup date with me. The grade of INC cannot be submitted unless all of these requirements have been met.

¹If you actually submit your letter to the *Times* and weight will jump to 30% of your course grade.

Plagiarism

I have no objection if you wish to spend your time copying out passages from other people's work. But I don't want to spend time reading these copies (life is too short!) and there's no point in grading you for a skill (copying) that every one of you has already mastered. Hence the most basic rule of academic life: submission of the work of another as if it were your own is absolutely unacceptable. Observe the following basic rules of scholarship: (1) any direct copying of words written by someone other than yourself must be enclosed in quotation marks and identified with a complete and precise reference (newspaper name, date, and page number for news reports, author, title, date and place of publication, page number for other sources, a precise URL address and date read for material taken from the Internet); (2) paraphrased passages must be identified in the same way (though in this case you must *not* use quotation marks); (3) every source you consult for a paper must be acknowledged - if not in a note, then in a bibliography at the end. Note too that it is a good idea to provide a precise reference for any factual claim that a prospective reader might question since this strengthens the force and *persuasiveness* of your argument as well as its integrity.

These rules have different implications depending on the nature of the assignment, and we will talk about them in class. Should you have any doubts or questions about what constitutes plagiarism, don't hesitate to discuss them with me or with someone in the Academic Support Services office.

Spring 2002 Calendar

TUESDAYS		THURSDAYS	
Jan	29	31	
Feb	5 Instructions for #1	7	
	12 Paper #1 due	14	
	19 Paper #1 revision due	21 Instructions for #2	
	26 Paper #2a due	28	
Mar	5 Paper #2b due	7	
	12 Paper #2a-c due	14 Instructions for #3	
	19 Spring vacation week	21 Spring vacation week	
	26 Paper #3 due	28	
Apr	2	4 Paper #3 revision due Instructions for #4	
	9	11	
	16 Paper #4 due	18 Instructions for #5	
	23	25	
	30	2 Paper #5 due	
May	7	9	
	14 Paper #5 revision due; Instructions for #6		