

Summer 2008

MPJO-765-10

COVERING CAPITOL HILL

Thursday 7:40PM – 10:10PM

Instructor: Paul Singer

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Office Hours – by appointment only

Overview: The course is designed to have each student serve as the congressional correspondent for a 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.

FOR EACH CLASS MEETING, students will be expected to bring two or 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.

During the semester, you will complete three writing assignments.

- 1) Write 500-600 word story about a piece of legislation. What it would it accomplish? Is it likely to pass? What it would mean to your readership if it became a 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?
- 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? 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 on your beat that is moving than waiting for the filing deadline for the class.
- 3) Final project – write a 1200-1500 word story for page one of your publication about something happening in Congress.

Every assignment will have a deadline, which will be strictly enforced. ANY ASSIGNMENT SUBMITTED AFTER THE DEADLINE WILL BE REJECTED AND WILL BE RECORDED AS AN “F.”

For each assignment, you will be required to turn in paper copies of press releases, hand-outs 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.

Grading: Story ideas/story meetings -- 20%; two small writing assignments – 20% each; final project 30%; participation/attendance, 10%.

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 BE RECEIVE AN “F.”

Punctual attendance is critical. If you absolutely have to miss a class – 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.

Readings:

There are two primary readings for this course – “Congress from the Inside” by Rep. (now Sen.) Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), which is on-sale at the university bookstore, and the Philadelphia Inquirer series “The Great Tax Giveaway,” which will be provided by the instructor. You will also need a Congressional handbook (known as a “facebook”), which is available at almost any bookstore in Washington for about \$15.

The class schedule detailed below is approximate, particularly because of the difficulty of scheduling a Member of Congress for a guest lecture. But the instructor will give you ample warning of any changes.

Class 1 – Thursday June 5

Introductions

Explanation of class assignments

Beats

What does it mean to “cover Congress.”

How to figure out what is going on in your beat

Class 2 – Thursday June 12

Story meeting

What does Congress do?

Process chart

House v. Senate

How many bills pass?

Where are the newsworthy moments?

Class 3 – Date TBD

Lobbying
Guest Speaker, Bob Gettlin, National Journal

Story meeting

Class 4 – June 26

First writing assignment due: Cover a bill

Story meeting
Computer assisted reporting

Class 5—July 3

Story meeting
Pass a Bill

Class 6 – July 10

Reading assignment due: “The Great Tax Giveaway”

Story meeting
Follow the money – earmarks, appropriations and campaign cash

Class 7 – July 17

Second writing assignment due – Cover a hearing or markup (note- it may be to your advantage to execute this story assignment earlier in the semester, given the irregularities of the congressional schedule, and your own).

Story meeting

Ethics – theirs and ours

Class 8 – July 24

Story meeting

Outside Congress
Who knows/who tells
Interest groups, lobbyists, courts, staffers, activists
States and local gov.
Think tanks, experts, academe

Class 9 – July 31

Guest Speaker/ Member of Congress TBA
Story meeting

Class 10 – Aug 7

Final project due

Discussion – “Congress from the Inside”
Congress as political theater