**PLSC 220-01 and 02: Introduction to American Government**

**Section 1: MW 10:30-11:45 in Weinstein Hall 209**

**Section 2: MW 1:30-2:45 in Weinstein Hall 209**

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**Office Hours: By Appointment Only**

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Why This Course is Different than the One You Took in High School, or Not

If your high school American or United States government class was anything like mine, and it may not have been, you studied the three branches of government, how a bill becomes a law, and elections. My class rarely discussed current events, engaged in uncomfortable political debates, or talked about how policies affected our lives. I left high school with little or no understanding of the theories that drive politics. I could not make connections between the world of “what’s happening now” and political history and processes. I designed this course to fill that gap by including material on ideology and the writings of leading thinkers. Events, processes, and ideas are the focus of our class discussions. Please come to class ready to think about and discuss the workings of politics in the United States.

You Can Expect Me…

1. To arrive at class on time, prepared, and ready to help you understand the politics of the United States beyond the material in the texts. I will offer other scholarly works and place them on the Blackboard site for your review. I allow ample time for you to revise drafts and move on to the next phase of the main assignment.
2. To design assignment and exams that allow you to apply what you have learned. I am a straightforward professor who will test you on the material we have covered.
3. My style is interactive, so expect me to ask questions. I pledge to do this in a way that allows you, the student, to gracefully decline if you do not have a contribution. Often there will be no “right” answer—the point is to engage your critical thinking skills.
4. To keep an open mind and listen more than I speak. To be available during office hours and for appointments to help you with assignments or readings.

I Expect You…

1. To read the material in advance of the class. To turn all cell phones off. No laptops without special permission.
2. *To attend every class and be prepared for discussion*. You may use your notes and the text to answer questions. I do not expect you to memorize all of the material. I use documentaries that I have carefully chosen for content and presentation. These are not “movies” for our entertainment. They are part of the class material and sources of exam questions. Please do not miss classes in which documentaries are shown, and take good notes.
3. To turn in paper assignments on time before classes. All papers must be in my inbox before class. I will not accept any papers sent during or after class.
4. To visit me during office hours, which are Tuesdays, 1-3, or by appointment.
5. To keep an open mind and listen more than you speak.

The Honor Code

Students must adhere to the University of Richmond Honor Code. This means that on both the midterm and final exam, students must write the following, “I pledge that I have neither given nor received assistance during the completion of this work.” You should provide your signature after the pledge.

It is a violation of the honor code to plagiarize content from any source. Plagiarism is the act of using someone else’s words without proper attribution. Paraphrasing does not exempt students from the need to cite sources. Please refer to the University of Richmond websites at <http://www.richmond.edu/about/features/honorcode.htm> and <http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/source.html> for additional guidance.

**The Rules**

**Rule 1. If you must miss class, you should notify me before, not after.**

**Rule 2. Your cell phone must be turned off during class.**

**Rule 3. Submit all assignments via email, and have them in to me before class on the**

**due date. If you cannot make the deadline, you must notify me in writing before the due date. The only acceptable excuse for a late assignment is illness or a family crisis. Email address: asimpson@richmond.edu**

**Rule 4. You may drink in class, but you may not eat.**

**Rule 5. Read the syllabus. If you need information that is not available on the syllabus or on the class blog, you may ask me via email or in class.**

**Main Assignment-Write an Opinion Editorial for Publication**

*The following was taken whole or in part from a website sponsored by Farleigh-Dickinson University. Retrieved on 16 August 2014 at http://view.fdu.edu/default.aspx?id=4807*.

Opinion editorial (op-ed) pieces can have an astounding influence over readers and are useful to students in honing writing skills. It is for this reason that writing an opinion editorial piece, and submitting it for publication, is your main assignment for this class, in addition to in-class writing assignments and exams.

Op-eds are opinion articles that provide readers with diverse opinions on timely news issues. Most op-eds relate to an issue in recent news, but also provide a fresh opinion or suggested course of action. While they are essentially opinion pieces, op-eds are balanced with factual information. Since op-ed pieces are longer than letters to the editor, authors have the opportunity to more fully develop their arguments.

**Timing is everything**

* Op-ed pieces need to be *timely* with the news, or papers will not print them. What’s hot in the news this week may become dull or over-analyzed by next week.
* Write a majority of your article when you have time to build your argument. Anticipate the news. Think ahead to predictable events, i.e. State of the Union Address, etc.
* Monitor the news to determine when you should submit to papers. Look for top stories, events or holidays that could give you a newsworthy edge over other submissions. Google Alert and other Web services can track news and provide hooks and timing for op-ed pieces.
* Adjust the lead or one of the themes based on developing news.

**Be current, concise and convincing**

Controversial news topics make great op-ed pieces. Clearly define where you stand. Don’t waste too many words providing background information—get to the point and make your point well. Use facts to boost your credibility and personal experience to provide a more compelling story. Be prepared in case the newspaper decides to run a counter-argument on the same page as your article.

**Highlight the action of your piece**

Make sure readers know exactly why your article pertains to them and what they should do after reading it. If you are trying to raise awareness on a particular issue, hook the readers by relating the issue to the individual, parental or community perspective. Give recommendations or sources of additional information.

**Avoid jargon**

Try to write your piece so that anyone that picks up the paper will understand your argument. Fill in all of the missing pieces that readers need: background information, definitions, etc. Avoid technical jargon and obscure references. If anything, try to tie your point into popular culture.

**Follow the rules**

Every newspaper has guidelines on what their specific requirements are for both writing and submitting pieces. We have compiled information for twenty leading papers to make this process easier for you. Follow those guidelines and call the Office of Public Relations if you have any questions.

**Edit**

Even if you have read and re-read your piece, run it by a few colleagues. If your piece is accepted, a word of caution: you should be prepared to edit/adapt on short notice.

**Getting started**

**Do some background reading**

Since different newspapers have different audiences, op-eds can change in tone, topic and format from paper to paper. Read a variety of op-eds to see how they differ.

**Identify your intent**

Why do you want to write an op-ed? Do you want to raise awareness on an issue? Do you want readers to take action for a cause? Focus on one objective in your op-ed piece and frame your article around it.

**Target your audience and the newspaper**

Tailor your op-ed to the publication and the readership of that paper. Follow each newspaper’s recommendations of text limit, format, etc.

**Research your topic—again**

Although you are an expert on the topic, see if there is any new information about it or if it has recently been in the news. Think of how best to explain your views to readers who may not be familiar with the issue. Gather fresh statistics to help prove your point.

**Format**

**Cover one issue in three points**

Focus on one issue in your op-ed and have one clear objective. Develop your issue in standard essay format, with an introduction, three key points and a powerful conclusion. Keep your piece concise and organized.

**Count the words**

Limit your piece to 750 words or less, depending on the guidelines of the newspaper. Use a suggested font and font size. It’s tempting to explain your argument in great detail, but newspapers have limited space and readers have limited attention spans. Be prepared for editors to cut sections of your piece to make it fit or change some of your wording if they desire.

**Use an active voice**

Using an active voice (“I believe that”) instead of a passive voice (“It is believed to be that”) will keep your piece concise and easy to read. It also gives an identity behind your opinions, making the piece more powerful.

**Write a catchy headline and first sentence**

You only have a few seconds to draw your reader into your article, so make sure you grab their attention with a strong headline and a powerful first sentence. Get to the point quickly—readers don’t have time to figure out what long anecdotes really mean.

**Finish strong**

Summarize your argument in a strong final paragraph with a memorable last sentence. If your objective is to make readers take action, make sure you tell them what they should do.

**Beware of attachments**

Most newspapers refuse to open emails that contain attachments. It is better to paste the op-ed into the body of the email.

**Cover section with contact information**

For all submissions, be sure to include a cover section with your name, day and evening phone numbers, mailing address, email address, title and FDU association. Use the cover section as an opportunity to explain your credentials and why this story is of interest to the public.

**Resource box**

Provide a brief description of your qualifications for use at the end of your article. Something like “Terri Sanchez is a student of sociology at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Teaneck, NJ, and works 30 hours per week at a women’s shelter; or, “Thomas Donaldson is a first-year student at the University of Richmond and a volunteer tutor for Richmond Schools.

**Double-check newspaper standards**

Every newspaper in print has different standards for op-ed pieces. Choose a few newspapers and carefully read the guidelines.

**IMP: The assignment will be done in stages so that we can submit the best possible product to the newspapers. Due dates for each stage of the process are in the syllabus**.

You should know if your piece will be published within two weeks—either the newspaper will contact you or you’ll see the article in print. Avoid the temptation to call the paper to see if they’re planning to run your article. If your piece runs, thank the news outlet. Make sure you get copies to distribute and let the University of Richmond Office of Public Relations know it was printed. If your piece is not accepted, don’t be discouraged. Rejection is a typical outcome even for successful op-ed submitters. If the timing is still right, immediately submit to another paper. If the moment has passed, think about how you can rework your argument or approach the topic from another angle. Wait for the right moment to pitch it again.

**Writing/Participation Assignments**

We have a class blog on which I will post questions for you to answer. Questions will be uploaded on Monday after class every two weeks unless something exciting happens—then I will post an extra question. You have until Wednesday at 5:00 pm to post an answer. You do not have to post to all of the questions, but I expect you to post frequently. You may post an answer to someone else’s comment, which is how we create a learning community.

**Assessment**

Participation\* 20%

Op-Ed Piece 25%

Midterm 25%

Final Exam 30%

\*Includes answering and asking questions in class, offering thoughtful opinions in class, and posting answers to discussion questions on our course blog.

Texts

*The New York Times,* available on the Internet. Please read it daily.

Edward S. Greenberg and Benjamin I. Page. 2012. *The Struggle for Democracy.*

Ball, Terence and Richard Dagger. 2011 (8th Edition). *Political Ideologies and the Democratic Ideal.*

**Class Schedule**

**PART I. THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT**

August 22 and 24 Review of Syllabus, Overview-*Blog Question UP*

Chapters 1 and 2, *Struggle*, “Democracy and American Politics” and “The Constitution”

August 29 and 31 Chapter 17, *Struggle*, “Domestic Policies”

Chapters 1-2, *Political Ideologies*

September 5 Guest Lecturer: Prof. Paul Achter, Chair and Associate Professor, Rhetoric and Communication Studies, “How to Think About Political Rhetoric”-*Blog Question UP*

September 7 Chapter 3, Struggle, “Federalism: States and Nation

Chapters 3-4, *Political Ideologies*

Class Discussion on Opinion Editorial Ideas

September 12 and 14 Chapters 9 and 10, *Struggle*, “Political Parties” and

“Voting, Campaigns and Elections”

*Struggle*, Chapter 7, Interest Groups and Business Corporations

*Blog Question UP*

**September 14**-Submit a short summary, 200-250 words, of your opinion editorial topic with a list of possible publication outlets. Choose key words that help to classify your editorial. You must also submit an editorial that you think is well written and persuasive. Submit this assignment via email. My email address is asimpson@richmond.edu. ***Remember, this assignment must be in my mailbox before class.***

September 19 and 21 Chapters 11 and 12, “Congress” and “The Presidency”

September 26 and 28 Two-Part Documentary: *Plutocracy*

*No Blog Question until October 17*

October 3 Review and Reflect: Where are we? Where have we been?

Where are we going?

Discuss Editorial Ideas and Challenges

October 5 MIDTERM EXAM-ALL STUDENTS MUST BRING LAPTOP TO CLASS

FALL BREAK BEGINS OCTOBER 7-12

**NO CLASS ON MONDAY OCTOBER 10**

**PART II. THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY**

October 12 *Struggle*, Chapter 14, “The Courts”

**Monday, OCTOBER 17, DRAFT OF OPINION EDITORIAL PIECE DUE-MUST BE AT LEAST 500 WORDS**

October 17 and 19 *Struggle,* Chapters 15 and 16, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties-*Blog Question Up on 10/17*

October 24 and 26 *Struggle*, Chapter 8, “Social Movements”

*Political Ideologies*, Chapters 8 and 9

October 31 and November 2 Documentary, “At the River I Stand”

November 7 and 9 *Struggle,* Chapter 5, “Public Opinion,” and Chapter 6, “News Media”

Discuss the Election Results!

***Last* *Blog Question UP***

**Wednesday, NOVEMBER 9, COMPLETE DRAFT OF OPINION EDITORIAL PIECE DUE**

**PART III. IDEAS THAT SHAPE OUR PAST AND OUR FUTURE**

November 14 and 16 *Political Ideologies*, Chapters 8, 9, and 10

November 24 Retrospective: Integrating Theory and Praxis-A primer on how to make an “A” on the Final Exam

Tying Up Loose Ends

**November 24**

**FINAL DRAFT OF OP ED PIECE DUE-Include information on your submission, including name of paper and date sent or planned date of submission. ALL OPINION EDITORIALS MUST BE SUBMITTED TO A NEWS OUTLET.**

THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY BEGINS NOVEMBER 22

December 28 and 30 REVIEW FOR EXAM

**EXAMS:**

**SECTION 1, 10:30 AM SECTION: MONDAY, DECEMBER 5 FROM 9-12 PM IN A COMPUTER CLASSROOM IN JEPSON HALL TBA**

**SECTION 2, 1:30 PM SECTION: TUESDAY, DECEMBER 6 FROM 2-5PM IN A COMPUTER CLASSROOM IN JEPSON HALL TBA**