

JCOM 5400/6400—Spring 2006

Seminar: Media Criticism

Wed. 4-6:30

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Hours: TR, 10:00-11:30; W, 4-5:00; by appt.

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Prerequisites: JCOM majors & minors must have completed JCOM 1000, 1110, 2000 & 3200. All students must have completed ENGL 1010 & 2010. Graduate students must have successfully completed JCOM 6000.

Materials To Help You Learn

Cooper, B. (2005). *Media Criticism: Course reader*: JCOM 5400/6400. Available in bookstore.

Publication manual of the American Psychological Association (2001) (5th ed.). Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association. (Amazon.com, half.com, or Borders). Required for graduate students. Undergraduates may use the online resources at: <http://www.apastyle.org> OR <http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/DocAPA.html>

Sillars, M. O. & Gronbeck, B. E. (2001). *Communication criticism: Rhetoric, social codes, cultural studies*. Waveland Press: Prospect Heights, IL.

Course Objectives: What You Will Learn

- To become more critical consumers of media texts
- To appreciate the impact of media messages on individuals, society & culture
- To think critically about the ways you respond to and use media
- To develop different perspectives to interpret pop culture & media messages
- To evaluate critically media issues related to multicultural diversity and fairness

Course Overview

Teaching a media criticism course raises a number of issues for students. In a certain sense, many of you are experts on the subject—or at least some areas of it. Additionally, your media preferences are emotionally and historically charged for many of you: you have strong feelings about your tastes. Now—I have no intention of trying to change your tastes, rather, my goal is to help you reflect on your use and tastes with a certain critical distance. Inevitably, the course will include some of my own biases and preferences, but I will be open about my preferences. I also want you to keep an open mind and be willing to consider opinions and perspectives that may differ from your own. I encourage you to challenge my preferences or those found in your readings, but with good reasons, having thought about the issues raised.

Part of the goal of this course is to help you understand how pervasive mass communication is in everyday life, and to help you become active and critical consumers of mass media messages. I hope to provide you with ways to interpret popular media & culture in which you do not take its meaning for granted. I want you to think about the ways you respond to and use media products and the way in which your preferences are shaped by other factors.

Please Note: We'll be viewing many examples of the media's representation of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Some of these examples will be R-rated. Our goal in this course is to examine the media's predominant images and this necessarily includes some content that may include violence, profanity, sexuality, etc.

How To Demonstrate What You Learn: Your final grade will be based on the following assignments, subject to modifications as necessary because of unplanned changes in the class. I expect your papers, weekly assignments and research discussions to demonstrate exceptional critical reflection and analysis.

Critical analyses and presentations (3)	15/20/25=60%
Discussion leader assignments & class participation	15%
Final Exam (optional for undergrads)	<u>25%</u>
	100%

Grading criteria:

Grade A: Exceptional. In addition to meeting the criteria for grades B & C, this work also:

1. Demonstrates superior skill and thought, skillful use of language to represent your ideas as a probable, believable and fair interpretation of the specific media issues.

2. Provides insights and demonstrates in-depth understanding of the topic, theories, etc.

3. Arguments and conclusions are exceptionally well developed, coherent, and well-organized.

Grade B: Above Average. In addition to meeting the criteria for grade C, work also:

1. Exhibits a thoughtful and thorough understanding of the issues being examined.

2. Shows some insight, critical reflection and creativity in the analysis.

Arguments/conclusions are organized clearly & very well supported with examples and evidence.

Fine writing.

Grade C: Average. Meets all of the minimum criteria for the specific assignment.

1. Writing errors are minor and language is used correctly.

2. Arguments and conclusions are adequately supported with specific examples.

3. Work is completed by the deadlines and conforms to page requirements.

4. Sources are cited correctly.

5. Demonstrates some insight or critical reflection. Interpretation relies mostly on description. In other words, states the obvious or simply re-states points already made in class/texts/videos, etc.

D or F: Below average. Does not fulfill minimum criteria for a grade of C. Overall, below average work that may have one or more of the following problems:

1. Excessive writing and/or language errors.

2. Work is based primarily on unsupported opinions; fails to use specific examples and evidence.

3. Misses the point of the assignment; lacks depth — demonstrates minimal effort.

4. Demonstrates minimal insight, interpretation or critical reflection.

5. Work is plagiarized.

Grade Negotiations: In order to be fair to everyone in the class, I do not negotiate grades. Please don't ask to be an exception to this policy. I also do not give incomplete grades except for reasons stated in university policy.

Making the Course More Useful: Both you and I have important responsibilities in this course. My responsibility is to organize a course and individual class sessions to maximize your learning of the course material. Your responsibility is to attend class, do the necessary preparation and participate fully in class discussions. Guidelines are listed below:

1. Attendance: You cannot get maximum benefit from the course if you are not present and not participating. If you come to class, complete your assignments on time, participate in discussion and exercises, and keep up with the readings, your grades will be better. Guaranteed. Aside from adversely affecting your course performance, skipping classes will make me irritable and send a message of rudeness to me and your classmates. If you miss more than one class meeting, your final grade may be reduced accordingly.

2. Arrivals & departures: Late arrivals and early departures also send a message of rudeness to me and the rest of the class and will count against your final grade.

3. In-class participation: Like any other skill, thinking and speaking critically take practice, and that is what this class is for. Therefore, the primary way I evaluate your class participation is through the questions you ask and the answers you volunteer. Please keep in mind that there is no such thing as a "stupid" question. Instead, our discussion provides you with an opportunity to improve your critical ability. Simply attending class and never taking part in our discussions will not guarantee full credit. Keep in mind—this is a seminar class; you are expected to take an active part in class discussions.

Your attitude toward the class and the material we cover is also an important part of the class. Every class has its norms, and an important norm is our class is a willingness to be open to, and considerate of, the thoughts and ideas of your classmates. Let's say we have 15 people in our class—that means we will have at least 15 different perspectives toward the readings, films, etc., based on our individual life experiences. Although you may disagree with the thoughts and perspectives of others, including me and those presented in your readings, it is essential that we all respect each others' views and beliefs. All viewpoints are valid and important—one view is not more valuable than another. Other norms for JCOM 5400/6400 are: consideration, respect, non-judgment, courtesy and attentiveness. In addition to regular attendance, your participation points will reflect how closely you choose to adhere to these norms. Finally, if your behavior is disruptive to the class, you will lose points.

4. Reading assignments: There is a lot of reading required for this course. It is your responsibility to read the assignments listed on the syllabus before coming to class. We'll be discussing the readings during class sessions and you will not be able to participate if you have not read the assignments. It will be very tough to catch up with the readings if you fall behind.

5. Conferences: If at any point during the semester you feel you have a problem with the class, please come see me right away so we can work problems out instead of letting them grow into major problems.

6. Current issues in media: To keep up with current events in the media and the world, you should read newspapers every day (e.g., *Salt Lake Tribune*) every day, *Time*, *Newsweek* or *U.S. News & World Report* every week, especially the sections dealing specifically with media. You'll also want to check regularly the department's on-line newspaper—KCOW— @ www.hardnewscafe.usu.edu. You may also wish to consult various trade and scholarly publications that deal specifically with media issues. You should also make a habit of watching network and local news daily and listening to radio news programs, especially Public Radio's "Morning Edition" and "All Things Considered."

7. Professional Portfolios: As part of the Senior Seminar capstone course required of all JCOM undergraduate majors for graduation, students must compile and present to the faculty a portfolio of professional-quality work. This portfolio may include work produced in JCOM courses, labs, and internships. The final portfolio, created as part of the Senior Seminar (JCOM 4000), will be evaluated by JCOM faculty and appropriate media professionals. For this reason, JCOM majors should maintain an ongoing file of coursework and other materials produced throughout their university careers that will reflect on the quality of their professional and academic preparation for communication careers. This material may include essays and papers written for classes, newspaper stories, video or Powerpoint productions, Internet sites, fliers or brochures, etc., that reflect your professional preparation. Start now in collecting these materials so that you will have a comprehensive file from which to select your best work to include in your final professional portfolio. Questions, ask your JCOM instructors.

Some Important Policies/Requirements

1. Deadlines: Are final. I make all class assignments well in advance of due dates and therefore all deadlines are final and non-negotiable. All late and missed assignments receive a grade of "F." In addition, if you fail to do an assignment, your final course grade will be lowered one letter grade for each missed assignment.

2. E-Mail Accounts. You are required to have an e-mail account, and should check your e-mail regularly throughout the semester for messages and assignments from me. Your e-mail address is due no later than Friday, January 13.

3. Academic Honesty: The University expects students and faculty alike to maintain the highest standards of academic honesty (for a complete definition, see University Catalogue, 2000-2002, p. 20, or the Code of Policies and Procedures for Students at Utah State University, Article V, Section 3). The policy states: "[C]heating, falsification or plagiarism [see definitions in catalogue] can result in warning, grade reduction, probation, suspension, expulsion, payment of damages, withholding of transcripts, withholding of degrees, removal from a class, performance of community service, referral to appropriate counseling" or other penalties as the university judiciary may deem appropriate.

The JCOM department has a "zero-tolerance" policy for plagiarism. Any form of academic dishonesty—including plagiarism—will result in an automatic F for the course and a report to the dean of the college. JCOM majors who engage in proven academic dishonesty will be dropped from the major. Students who hand in similar or identical work will receive an "F" regardless of who copied from whom. If you have any questions about what's acceptable work under strict codes of academic honesty, see the USU *The Code of Policies and Procedures for Students*, or check with me.

Plagiarism and how to avoid it: <http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml>

4. Course repeat policy: Students can take JCOM classes a minimum of three times; failure to achieve minimum grades will cause students to be dropped from the major.

Description of Class Assignments

1. Discussion Leader Assignments: During the semester, you will be assigned three classes for which you are responsible to lead the discussion based on the assigned readings. In addition to leading the discussion for your assigned dates, you'll need to bring a one-page handout summarizing the major points presented in the readings for that day. Your discussion and presentation to the class needs to reflect your critical assessment of the assigned articles. As you read these articles, think of how your assessment of them will help us better understand the issues discussed in the articles or push us to think in new directions. Your analysis and summary of the articles will help form the basis for our class discussions. I will provide more

info about these class sessions once the dates are assigned.

Undergraduate students will work in teams for this assignment; graduate students will work individually.

2. Final Exam: A comprehensive (essay question) final exam is required for all graduate students and is optional for undergraduates. I will give you a study guide before the final exam. FYI: Final exam questions may be taken from the readings but not specifically covered in class.

3. Critical Analyses: You will be writing three critical essays from the topic areas listed below. You may select specific areas within the required topics, following the specific criteria for each.

- *Analysis #1—Representations of Race & Ethnicity*
- *Analysis #2—Representations of Gender, Femininity & Masculinity*
- *Analysis #3—Representations of Sexual Minorities or Social Issues, Scandals, etc.*

a. Analyze at least two different types of media texts. In other words, don't select to analyze TV for every essay. Also, you need to examine both entertainment and news media.

b. For each essay, you must compare similar types of media texts—sitcoms to sitcoms, not sitcoms to dramas. The narrative requirements of the two types of programming are very different and would be like comparing “apples to oranges.”

c. You must view and examine at least two hours of a TV series (e.g., four episodes of 30 minute programs, etc.).

d. Please note: Edited films are not acceptable for your critiques.

e. All media analyzed for your essays need to be targeted to adult audiences (21 years & older).

f. For one critical essay, graduate students will compare news coverage of an actual event or person to the Hollywood film version of the same event or person. This assignment is optional for undergraduates.

4. Presentation of Critical Analyses

As part of your critical analysis papers, you also will be presenting the results of your research in an informal presentation to the class. You'll need to bring in examples from your research papers for your presentations (e.g., videotapes, magazine articles, etc.)

Please do not think of these presentations as being “put on the spot.” Rather, think of your presentation as an informal discussion in which you share the insights you gained from your analysis with your classmates. Do be prepared and organized—the presentations are part of your overall grade for your analyses. And be prepared to address questions/comments.

A major goal of the presentations is to help you understand the role we each play in the interpretation process. None of us will experience media messages in exactly the same way; we'll each notice different things and miss others. Your presentations allow us to discuss our different perceptions and interpretations of media texts.

Writing Guidelines for Critical Analyses:

1. Typed, 12 pt. font, double-spaced papers (APA or MLA style) are required 5-6 pp. maximum for undergraduates; 9-10 pp. maximum for grad students). A word of caution: Don't be misled by the length or expected content for these assignments. The maximum page requirements require that you fill your pages with pertinent and insightful information. In other words, make every word count.
2. Outlines for your critical analyses (undergrad & grad) will be discussed in class before papers are due. Be sure to follow the outline, addressing the criteria listed.
3. Each of you will submit the first two sections of your critique (introduction & critical method) for me to review and provide feedback before you submit the final versions of your analysis. Please note: If you submit a rough draft of these sections, I'll return them to you without comments. I only provide feedback on work that reflects the criteria.
4. Grades are based on thoroughness, clarity and insight. Use specific examples to support your ideas and conclusions. Your goal is to generate some conclusions about the media texts you analyze and whether the media narratives reinforce or challenge dominant societal ideologies.
5. Avoid extended quotations. Most can be cut down and paraphrased. I'm looking for your original thought and synthesis of information/data, not just regurgitation of what others have said.
6. Spelling/syntax/grammar/punctuation/style errors lower your score. Errors of fact result in failure for the

assignment. So proofread carefully. And then proofread a second time! FYI: Proofreading tips for common writing errors: <http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets.shtml>

7. English Department Writing Center: You may schedule an appointment with the Writing Center by phone (797-2712) or on-line (<http://writingcenter.usu.edu/>). The Writing Center is located at RBWest 104. There is a small fee for this service.
8. Information/data or quotation or opinion or statement of fact taken from any other source must be attributed using APA style (5th ed.). You may paraphrase statements of others, but must cite the source; if the material is quoted (i.e., from newspapers, books, magazine articles, TV, etc.), it must be placed in quotes, reproduced with complete accuracy, and cited completely. Failure to give full credit to your sources of information may be considered plagiarism
9. Buy a folder for your papers, and please keep all of your critiques in the folder each time you submit your critical analyses.