

# Introduction to US electronic media

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Comm 3211

## Course description and objectives

This course provides a basic introduction to critical media studies: the analysis of mass media texts, institutions, audiences, and practices with a focus on the historical, cultural, political, and economic contexts in which those phenomena operate. The mass media play significant -- and powerful -- roles in our daily lives: enough so that trying to understand contemporary US society without a solid understanding of the mass media would be nearly impossible. Our readings and lectures this semester will provide an overview of different analytical and theoretical approaches to the study of the mass media that scholars have taken in the past, as well as a survey of recent shifts in the media terrain that will have (and are already having) significant impact on the future of media studies.

## Readings

The following *required* book is available at the University Bookstore in Coffman Union:

- Jeffrey Nealon & Susan Searls Giroux, *The Theory Toolbox* (second edition)

Please note that there is an earlier edition of this book. Exam/quiz questions and paper prompts will be based on the second edition. Other required readings will be made available on the course Moodle site.

## Moodle

If you are on the official course roster, you should already have access to the course's Moodle site. Simply point your web browser to the U's main Moodle page (<http://ay13.moodle.umn.edu>), log in using your University X.500 and select the "COMM3211\_001S14" link from the "My Courses" menu in the "Navigation" box.

We will use Moodle for several things this semester:

- access to our required non-book readings
- access to lecture outlines and the prompts for the papers
- occasional business-related announcements about the course

More information on using Moodle can be found at <http://www.oit.umn.edu/moodle/student-guides/index.htm>

## Grades

This course follows the University's published standards for A-F grading:

- A: "achievement that is outstanding relative to the level necessary to meet course requirements"
- B: "achievement that is significantly above the level necessary to meet course requirements"
- C: "achievement that meets the course requirements in every respect"
- D: "achievement that is worthy of credit even though it fails to meet fully the course requirements"
- F: "signifies that the work was . . . completed but at a level of achievement that is not worthy of credit."

Points will be awarded in a "pile it on" fashion: i.e., completing more work allows you to add to your final point total. You can earn points toward your final course grade as follows:

- 0-30 points for every exam (there will be four of these)
- 0-10 points for every paper (there will be four of these)
- 0-1 points for every quiz (there will be at least five -- and possibly more -- of these)

I reserve the right to offer occasional opportunities to earn points via extra assignments. Such opportunities will be the exception, rather than the rule, and they will *not* be offered on an individual basis.

Overall point totals will translate to letter grades as follows:

A	93-100	B+	87-89	C+	77-79	D+	67-69
A-	90-92	B	83-86	C	73-76	D	60-66
		B-	80-82	C-	70-72	F	0-59

- “S/N” grades will only be given to students who have registered for the course on an S/N basis.
- “I” grades will only be given under extraordinary circumstances (i.e., major life emergencies).

## Exams

There will be four exams: one each during our regularly scheduled class periods on 13 Feb, 13 Mar, 15 Apr, and 8 May. Exams will consist of “check all that apply” multiple-choice questions and will be “semi-cumulative”: i.e., they will focus on material covered in the readings/lectures since the previous exam -- but since that material will often depend on an understanding of the material that has come before it, you shouldn’t simply forget everything we cover in, say, the first four weeks of the semester after the first exam is over. Each exam is worth up to 30 points towards your final course grade. Because of the number of points available in the “pile it on” grading system, there will be no make-up exams given.

On exam days, our classroom will be cleared prior to the start of the exam. As soon as you enter the room, you will be given your copy of the exam and an answer sheet. You will not be allowed to consult any outside materials once inside. For reasons of exam security, leaving the room for any reason (including bathroom breaks) once the exam has begun means that you are done: your answer sheet will be collected and you will not be allowed to re-enter the room. To be fair to the inevitable latecomers, no one will be allowed to leave the room until 11:30 am (which shouldn’t be a problem, since you probably won’t be able to complete the exam that quickly and still pass). Latecomers arriving after 11:30 am have to take their chances that no one else has finished and left the room.

## Papers

There will be four short papers. Prompts for these papers will be posted to the course Moodle site at least a week in advance of their respective due dates. Each paper should run roughly 750-1000 words in length and is worth up to 10 points towards your final course grade.

Papers must be typed or printed, double-spaced, and stapled. Papers must be submitted (a) in class, (b) directly to me, or (c) to my mailbox in 250 Ford. Do not submit your papers via email, under office doors, or to any of the GTAs (except when they’re helping to collect them during class).

The following grade penalties apply automatically to papers that fail to meet the requirements above:

- lateness 1 point per day or fraction thereof
- not typed/printed 1 point
- not double-spaced 1 point
- not stapled 1 point
- less than 750 words 1 point
- submitted to the wrong place 1 point

Where applicable, these penalties are cumulative (e.g., a short paper that’s 2 days late is automatically penalized 3 points). For purposes of assessing lateness, the clock starts ticking at the end of class on the relevant due date and it stops whenever I actually have the printed copy of your paper in my hands. So if you place a paper due on Thursday in my mailbox on Friday and I don’t actually pick it up until Tuesday, it goes into the gradebook as having been turned in on Tuesday: i.e., five days late. Please bear in mind that 250 Ford closes at 4:00p on weekdays and is not open at all on the weekends.

## Quizzes

Over the course of the semester, there will be at least 5 -- and possibly more -- short quizzes given in class. Neither the exact number of quizzes nor the quiz dates will be announced in advance.

- On quiz days, quizzes may begin at any time during the class period, and will last for 10 minutes. There will be no extra time offered for quizzes, and no make-up quizzes given.
- Each quiz will consist of 10 fact-based questions and is worth up to 1 point towards your final course grade. Questions will be drawn from the assigned readings and/or the lectures for as many as three consecutive class sessions up to and including the class in which the quiz is given. [E.g., a quiz given at the end of the period on 25 Feb could include questions on the readings and/or the lectures from 18-25 Feb.]

## Grade queries

Queries about individual exam questions (e.g., “why is C the correct answer to question #4?”) can be directed to me or any of the GTAs. Queries about individual exam grades (e.g., requests for grade changes) should only be directed to me, as the GTAs are not empowered to change exam grades once they’ve been assigned.

Queries about individual paper grades (e.g., “why did my paper get a grade of 7/10?”) should be directed to the specific GTA who assigned the initial grade. Disputes over individual paper grades (e.g., “I think this paper deserves better than a 7/10”) must be submitted in writing to me along with the graded copy of the paper in question. Written disputes must include a clear explanation for why you believe your assigned grade is wrong. In the event of such disputes, I will regrade your paper myself and the new grade -- regardless of whether it’s higher, lower, or the same -- will be your final grade for that paper.

Queries about overall course grades (e.g., “what’s my point total so far?” or “what do I need on exam #4 to get a B for the course?”) should be directed to me. The GTAs do not have access to the full gradebook.

## Academic dishonesty

The following is a partial list of examples of academic dishonesty:

- plagiarism in any of its forms
- copying another student’s work (in whole or in part) on papers, exams, or quizzes
- having someone else write papers or take exams/quizzes for you
- attempting to consult notes, books, or other external sources during exams. [And, for the record, “other external sources” includes phones, mp3 players, pagers, PDAs, headsets, headphones, and other electronic devices.]
- knowingly assisting someone else in their efforts to engage in any of the above practices

The minimum penalty for academic dishonesty is a zero for the assignment in question. When in doubt, play it safe. During exams, do not allow your gaze to wander in ways that might look like you’ve got crib notes stashed somewhere or you’re “borrowing” answers from a neighbor. To put it bluntly, the risks are high (most cheating/plagiarism cases are very easy to identify), the penalties are higher (as severe as expulsion from the University), and the potential benefits are usually trivial (e.g., you get the answer to a quiz question that might turn a C into a C+). More to the point, the time and effort it takes to engage in “good” (i.e., undetectable) plagiarism is probably more time and effort than it would take to actually do the assignment in question the honest way.

Some helpful resources to avoid academic dishonesty include:

- <http://www.oscai.umn.edu/integrity/student/index.html>
- <http://www.comm.umn.edu/~grodman/wordpress/?p=342>

## Miscellaneous

- Significant disruptions of the normal flow of course-related business -- e.g., using cell phones in class, excessive side chatter -- may result in grade penalties.
- You may make audio and/or video recordings of class meetings for your personal use, provided you can do so without disrupting the ordinary flow of the class. The purchase and/or sale of either written notes or recordings of class meetings is strictly prohibited.

- I will make every reasonable effort to accommodate students' needs relating to religious holidays and/or documented disabilities. By University policy, you must provide me with written notice (for religious holidays) and/or official documentation (for disabilities), and you must do so with enough lead time for such accommodations to be arranged.

## General tips

**(1) Read your syllabus.** This document contains the basic ground rules by which this course works. Under exceptional circumstances (e.g., life and death emergencies), we may be willing to bend the course rules, ignorance of those rules on your part is not such a circumstance.

**(2) Show up to class on time, pay attention, and stay until the end of the period.** Significant portions of our exams will be based on the lectures. If you miss large portions of class (either through absence or inattention), you will struggle to do well.

**(3) Do the required readings as scheduled.** The lectures and readings will not duplicate each other enough for you to safely ignore either of them. You should not assume that your knowledge of the lectures will allow you to safely fake your way through quiz/exam questions about the reading.

**(4) Think about the lectures and readings.** While the quizzes and exams will include some straightforward factual questions, you will not do well on them if you simply try to memorize a bunch of names and dates, or to regurgitate some key phrases from the lectures without understanding what those mean. Similarly, the papers will require you to apply concepts from the lectures and readings, rather than just summarizing them.

**(5) Take careful, intelligent notes during the lectures.** This does not mean that you should simply try and write down everything that gets said. That makes you into an unthinking parrot, rather than an actively engaged student. Instead, you should listen for -- and focus on -- the core arguments of the lectures.

**(6) Take careful, intelligent notes as you read.** Your reading notes should serve as guidelines to the major points raised by the readings. This means that you need to strike a balance between "too much" (e.g., highlighting most of the text) and "too little" (e.g., creating a list of page numbers without any explanation for why they matter) that will allow your notes to serve as an effective study guide.

**(7) Ask thoughtful questions.** If you don't understand a major point from either the lectures or the readings, ask about it. If not in class, then during our office hours. This means more than simply asking for a second (or third) repetition of a particular sentence so that you can write it down word for word. Ideally, your goal is to understand the concept in question, rather than just being able to quote it mindlessly.

**(8) Study cooperatively.** You don't get to work collectively while taking the quizzes/exams (sorry), but you should go over your reading and lecture notes in small groups. When run well, such study groups can be a very effective way to help fill in gaps that you may have in your notes, and to provide additional clarity on difficult concepts.

**(9) Take advantage of our office hours.** Those office hours exist for your benefit. So please use them. If none of our official office hours fit your schedule, make an appointment to meet with one of us at some other, mutually convenient time.

**(10) Plan ahead.** Bear in mind that the work required of you this semester takes time. This is not a course where simply memorizing a long list of facts the night before exams will earn you an acceptable grade. The semester will go by much faster than you think, so plan accordingly.

## Writing tips

**(1) Meet the assignment's basic requirements.** One of the most common mistakes that students make is to ignore a vital part of the assignment's instructions: e.g., they turn in a descriptive essay instead of an argumentative one, they submit only one part of a two-part assignment, etc. This is a sure-fire way to earn a low grade.

**(2) Present your work as if it matters to you.** Spellcheck it. Proofread it. Copy-edit it. If you don't care enough about what you've written to make it as polished as possible, you shouldn't expect it to earn a good grade.

**(3) Trim the fat.** Padding out the wordcount of an essay with unnecessary description and/or needless repetition is not a recipe for success. In most cases, such padding will dramatically lower the quality of your essay, since it will distract from (and even undermine) your actual argument.

**(4) Show your evidence.** Use quotations and citations from the required readings as necessary to support the claims you're making. Know when a claim you're making needs to be supported with outside sources. And, if you're drawing on outside sources, make sure to cite those sources properly.

**(5) Argue your points.** Don't merely assert them. For example, simply saying that you think that Author Q is wrong is far less convincing than explaining *why* you think so. Similarly, if your main point boils down to "I agree with what the author says" or "This reading taught me something new," you will not do very well.

**(6) Argue your points *well*.** Get the facts straight. Make sure the facts support your case. Know the difference between correlation and causation. Perhaps most importantly, anticipate counter-arguments to your position -- *especially* if your argument runs contrary to ideas we've already covered. You are free to disagree with our required readings but, if you do, you need to be able to explain why you're right and those readings are wrong.

**(7) Don't overstate your case.** Sweeping generalizations about what "everyone" knows or about what has "always" been true are rarely (if ever) accurate. More likely, they will undermine your argument's validity. Similarly, overblown claims (e.g., "the most important invention since fire") rarely work well. If there are important truths in your more hyperbolic statements, you want to present them with appropriate nuance and subtlety.

**(8) Avoid the passive voice.** There are circumstances when the passive voice is appropriate -- and even necessary -- but a persuasive, argumentative essay is usually not one of those moments. In most cases, passive sentence constructions weaken your argument by taking people and institutions who are absolutely central to whatever claim(s) you're trying to make and then making them invisible.

**(9) Be cautious about personal anecdotes.** Used properly, stories from your own life can provide valuable support for a good argument. But anecdotes that merely provide another example of a phenomenon described in the reading ("this happened to me too!") rarely help your argument. Similarly, your personal experiences may not be representative of the population as a whole, and so it may be risky to use such experiences as supporting evidence for a thesis that purports to address broader social and cultural phenomena.

## **And finally...**

**(1) Your grade is based on your performance, not your effort.** Trying hard is a good thing (it's certainly better than not trying at all), but it's not the same thing as succeeding. Hard work will probably improve your grade but, by itself, it does not guarantee that you'll earn the grade you want.

**(2) You have to earn your grade; we don't simply give it to you.** To get an A, you need to do A-level work. You will not earn a passing grade simply because you've paid your tuition, because you're graduating, because you're on the broomball team, because you've never gotten a bad grade before, etc. If you need a particular grade to graduate, keep your scholarship, stay in school, etc., you need to do the work that will earn you that grade.

**(3) The semester lasts sixteen weeks -- and they all count.** Your course grade is based on the work you do all semester long, not just part of it. Finishing strong will generally not repair the damage done by blowing off the first two months of the semester. Similarly, a strong beginning to the semester will rarely allow you to safely coast through the final month without doing any work at all.

**(4) The time to worry about your grade for this course is now.** Do not wait until finals week to try and earn whatever grade you need/want. And *definitely* do not wait until after final grades have been turned in. Turning up after the semester is over to plead for a better grade will not work -- especially if you seem to be working harder to “earn” a grade change than you worked to earn your original grade.

**(5) Your chance to earn your grade ends when the semester does.** The *only* exceptions to this rule involve the sort of major life emergencies (e.g., extended hospitalization, death in the family, etc.) that cause you to miss large portions of the semester. In such cases, you will be required to provide independent verification of the emergency in question, and you will receive a final grade of “I” pending the completion of the work that you’ve missed.

**(6) There is no “extra paper” option to boost your grade.** The syllabus spells out the required work for the course, and we will not offer additional opportunities to meet the “needs” of individual students.

**(7) Do not overburden yourself.** You may thrive on pressure, or you may be comfortable carrying 18 credit hours while holding down a full-time job and being a single parent. If so, that’s a rare gift. Mere mortals, however, should either not try to take on too much at once, or they should recognize (and accept) that trying to juggle too many major tasks will cause their performance in at least one (and often more than one) of those to suffer.

**(8) Your life outside this class is your responsibility.** There are lots of things in this world more important than this course. But the vast majority of those won’t excuse you from the course requirements (and the ones that will tend to be major life emergencies). It’s certainly your prerogative to decide that (for instance) your internship at Target matters more to you than this course. But you need to recognize that your coursework (and thus your grade) will suffer if you put this class too low on your list of priorities.

## Reading/exam/paper schedule

[Readings should be completed in advance of the dates listed. Except for the Nealon and Giroux book, all readings are available on the course Moodle site.]

<b>21 Jan</b>	no reading
<b>23 Jan</b>	this syllabus Nealon and Giroux, pp. 1-8
<b>28 Jan</b>	Nealon and Giroux, pp. 9-20 Carey, “A Cultural Approach to Communication”
<b>30 Jan</b>	<b>NO CLASS</b>
<b>4 Feb</b>	Nealon and Giroux, pp. 51-91 Williams, “Culture Is Ordinary”
<b>6 Feb</b>	Nealon and Giroux, pp. 107-120
<b>11 Feb</b>	<b>Paper #1 due</b> review session
<b>13 Feb</b>	<b>Exam #1</b>
<b>18 Feb</b>	Williams, “Communications and Community” McChesney, “U.S. Media at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century”
<b>20 Feb</b>	Vaidhyanathan, “The Googlization of Us”

25 Feb	Nealon and Giroux, pp. 21-34 Williamson, <i>Decoding Advertisements</i> [selections]
27 Feb	Nealon and Giroux, pp. 35-50
4 Mar	Nealon and Giroux, pp. 93-105 Hall, "The Narrative Construction of Reality"
6 Mar	Hebdige, "From Culture to Hegemony"
11 Mar	<b>Paper #2 due</b> review session
13 Mar	<b>Exam #2</b>
18-20 Mar	<b>NO CLASS -- SPRING BREAK</b>
25 Mar	Seigworth, "Sound Affects" Grossberg, "Mapping Popular Culture"
27 Mar	Morley, "Theoretical Orthodoxies"
1 Apr	Slack and Wise, <i>Culture and Technology</i> [selections]
3 Apr	McLeod, "Copyright Criminals"
8 Apr	Nealon and Giroux, pp. 171-205 Pang, "Copying <i>Kill Bill</i> "
10 Apr	<b>Paper #3 due</b> review session
15 Apr	<b>Exam #3</b>
17 Apr	Nealon and Giroux, pp. 121-137
22 Apr	Nealon and Giroux, pp. 139-169 additional reading t.b.a.
24 Apr	Nealon and Giroux, pp. 207-228
29 Apr	Nealon and Giroux, pp. 229-254 additional reading t.b.a.
1 May	Nealon and Giroux, pp. 255-268
6 May	<b>Paper #4 due</b> review session
8 May	<b>Exam #4</b>