

Spring 2009

**MPJO-765  
COVERING CAPITOL HILL  
THUR 7:50-9:50PM  
WALSH 390**

Instructor: Paul Singer  
Contact phone – 202-746-6047  
Email: [pbs22@georgetown.edu](mailto:pbs22@georgetown.edu); [singer@rollcall.com](mailto:singer@rollcall.com)  
Office Hours – by appointment only

Overview: The course is designed to have each student serve as a mock congressional correspondent for a specific 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 would it accomplish? Is it likely to pass? What would it 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 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 RECEIVE A ZERO.

Stories must be filed by e-mail to the instructor by the time class begins on the day the assignment is due. PLEASE submit written assignments as Word documents (.doc not .docx) and attach them to your e-mail.

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.

The instructor will grade and edit your assignments and return them to you by e-mail. You may rewrite any story for extra credit; the rewrite deadlines are listed below.

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 RECEIVE A ZERO.

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 , which is available at almost any bookstore in Washington for about \$15.

It would also be to your advantage to buy an AP style manual. Your papers will be graded using AP style.

Honor Code:

All students within SCS are expected to maintain the highest standards of academic and personal integrity in pursuit of their education at Georgetown. Academic dishonesty in any form is a serious offense, and students found in violation are subject to academic penalties that include, but are not limited to, failure of the course, termination from the program, and revocation of degrees already conferred.

The Honor Code pledge follows:

In the pursuit of the high ideals and rigorous standards of academic life, I commit myself to respect and uphold the Georgetown University Honor System: To be honest in any

academic endeavor, and To conduct myself honorably, as a responsible member of the Georgetown community, as we live and work together.

Disability policy:

Students with documented disabilities have the right to specific accommodations that do not fundamentally alter the nature of the course. Some accommodations might include note takers, books on tape, extended time on tests, and interpreting services among others.

Students with disabilities should contact the Academic Resource Center (Leavey Center, Suite 335; 202-687-8354; [arc@georgetown.edu](mailto:arc@georgetown.edu); <http://ldss.georgetown.edu/index.cfm>) before the start of classes to allow their office time to review the documentation and make recommendations for appropriate accommodations. If accommodations are recommended, you will be given a letter from ARC to share with your professors. You are personally responsible for completing this process officially and in a timely manner. Neither accommodations nor exceptions to policies can be permitted to students who have not completed this process in advance.

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, Jan. 8**

Introductions

Explanation of class assignments

Grading

Beats

What does it mean to “cover Congress.”

How to figure out what is going on in your beat

THOMAS and Roll Call et. al.

### **Class 2 – Thursday, Jan. 15**

Story meeting

Newswriting 101

What does Congress do?

House v. Senate

How many bills pass?

The NEW Congress

### **Class 3 – Thursday, Jan. 22**

Story meeting

“I’m just a Bill...”

Process chart

Where are the newsworthy moments?

What’s a mark-up?

Who matters most in Congress?

Who matters most to YOUR readers?

### **Class 4 – Thursday, Jan. 29**

\*\* First writing assignment due: Cover a bill

Story meeting

Pass a bill

### **Class 5 – Thursday, Feb. 5**

Story meeting

Follow the money

Campaign cash

Appropriations

Personal financial disclosure

### **Class 6 – Thursday, Feb. 12**

Lobbying

Guest Speaker – Bob Gettlin, National Journal

\* Deadline for rewrite of first assignment

### **Class 7 – Thursday, Feb. 19**

\* Reading Assignment due – “The Great Tax Giveaway”

Story meeting

Earmarks

Guest Speaker TBA

**Class 8 – Thursday, Feb. 26**

\*\* 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

Outside Congress

Who knows/who tells

Interest groups, lobbyists, courts, staffers, activists

States and local gov.

Think tanks, experts, academe

**Class 9 – Thursday, March 5**

Story meeting

Computer Assisted Reporting

*BYE WEEK*

**Class 10 – Thursday, March 19**

\* Deadline for rewrite of second writing assignment

Politics

Campaigns

Leadership

Caucuses

**Class 11 – Thursday, March 26**

Guest Speaker -- Member of Congress TBA

**Class 12 – Thursday, April 2**

\*\* Final project due

Story Meeting

Ethics – theirs and ours

New office of Congressional Ethics

Off-the-record/ Background

*BYE WEEK*

**Class 13 – Thursday, April 16**

\* Deadline for final project rewrite

Story meeting

“Congress from the Inside”

What does a member of Congress do all day?

**Class 14 – Thursday, April 23**

What does a congressional correspondent do all day?

What is next for you?

Guest speaker – Kasie Hunt, CongressDaily