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Author: Emelie Peine

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## SUBMISSION FOR THE SPRING 2007 JAMES SLEVIN ASSIGNMENT SEQUENCE PRIZE

**Instructor:** Emelie Peine

**Sequence Title:** *Writing for the Real World: Composing a Letter to the Editor*

This assignment sequence was designed for the course *Corporate Controversies: Exploring Big Scandals in Big Business* (DSOC 111). This is the first major sequence of the course and is intended to introduce students to the most current events related to economic governance, corporate social responsibility, business ethics, and corruption while at the same time putting them immediately into the driver's seat of their own learning and writing. The readings that accompany this sequence are drawn (both by me and the students themselves) from current print media and therefore change semester-to-semester depending on which major corporations are under scrutiny and for what.

Students must first choose an article or editorial from a major local, national, or international newspaper or magazine to serve as the basis for their letters to the editor. Then, they complete a series of essay assignments and revision that culminates in the submission of a 200-400 word letter to the editor of that periodical. The sequence includes 3 main writing assignments as well as in-class exercises and peer review. The first essay assignment is an analysis of the argument presented in the article or editorial to which they plan to respond in their letter. In this assignment, students are not yet asked to respond to the author's argument, but first to engage it on its own grounds. They are asked to identify the author's main argument, supporting arguments, evidence, and any counterarguments that are addressed. Preparation for this assignment includes an in-class exercise I call "Find The Argument" where I place class readings (again, articles and editorials appearing in current editions of newspapers and magazines) on overhead transparencies and ask the students to do as a class just what I am asking them to do in their essay—find the argument, counterargument, evidence, etc. Through this exercise they learn that the main argument in a newspaper editorial is often *not* the first sentence of the first paragraph, and that it is crucial to read carefully in order to address the author's arguments on their own terms.

The second assignment is entitled "Critique In Essay Form" and is designed to be a longer response to their chosen article in which I encourage them to explore several different points of critique (or support) that they may wish to pursue in their letter. This essay is then peer-reviewed so that they can discuss with their peer group which of their arguments is the strongest and the most likely candidate for the subject of a letter to the editor.

The third assignment is the letter itself. Preparation for this assignment includes an in-class exercise I call "The Concise Sentence". In this exercise, students bring the second essay to class and locate the longest sentence in the paper. I ask them to write this sentence by itself at the top of a clean sheet of paper. I then ask them to pass the paper to the student on their left, and that student is charged with re-writing the sentence with one less word. The process continues until no words can be removed without

compromising the meaning of the sentence. Students then take their papers back and decide which of the iterations they think makes the best sentence and we discuss why some words could be removed and why they were there in the first place.

Finally, I provide feedback on the letter drafts, the students revise them, and as the final assignment they are required to submit them to the periodical in which the original editorial appeared and either Cc me on the submission or send me the automatic confirmation of receipt from the periodical.

## **RATIONALE**

This assignment is designed to accomplish five goals: first, to engage students early in the semester with the intensely current nature of the larger sociological issues we are exploring in class. In other words, this is not abstract. Society is faced every day with the legal, moral, and ethical dilemmas of corporate accountability and government regulation of the economy. While they may be familiar with Enron and Martha Stewart, they may be less aware of BP pipeline leaks, GE's pollution of the Hudson river, Wal-Mart's gender discrimination lawsuit, or countless other equally important but less visible controversies.

Second, it is designed to put them in the driver's seat of their own learning early in the semester. Because students choose their own topics—and even help choose 2 weeks' worth of course readings—they both take responsibility for the class and get to write about something that they feel passionately about, or at least something about which they really feel that they have something to say. In the second assignment, I ask them to explain why they think it is important to respond to their chosen article. What do people need to know that the author doesn't address or that you want to emphasize further? It gives their writing "real-world" significance, which leads to the third goal of the assignment.

Third, this assignment takes writing out of the classroom and into the "real world". I believe intensely that writing can turn individuals into citizens, and when executed well, is one of the most powerful ways that we can engage with our immediate political, economic, and social world. In short, this assignment seeks to make writing relevant. Here, the students aren't just writing for me, but for a newspaper or magazine editor. Since it is something they care about, they genuinely want the letter to be good enough to be published, so they tend to work very hard, particularly on revisions. They are also writing under restrictions not arbitrarily assigned by me, but by a newspaper editor. If they go over the word limit they can't just apologize to their professor in class—their letter won't even be considered and they know that. It instills a sense of accountability for their writing beyond the grade they get in my class.

Fourth, my class is essentially built around teaching argument, and I find this to be an excellent foundational building block for that process. Here, the student ultimately has to make one, single, elegant, articulate, and painfully concise argument. But, because of the sequence, he or she learns that crafting a solid but concise argument isn't the same as having an opinion. It involves analyzing and understanding the original argument on

its own terms (assignment 1/"Find the Argument" exercise), exploring all possible responses including evidence and counterargument (assignment 2), and finally whittling and honing the language to make your point as clear as possible (final letter/"The Concise Sentence" exercise). I am essentially trying to break down the process of constructing an argument into discrete elements, and then building from there towards more complex formulations, which I develop in further assignment sequences throughout the semester.

## **STUDENT-FACULTY AND STUDENT-STUDENT INTERACTION**

I have three points of intervention in this sequence. The first is informal and comes at the point that students are choosing their article. It is important to make sure that students are choosing an article that they find interesting, but that also gives them something to work with. A wire news article stating the facts of a legal dispute, for example, would not provide adequate fodder for a letter to the editor. In the age of the internet, it is also important to make sure that first-year students know how to recognize a reputable news source as well as one that accepts letter submissions. During the first week of readings for this unit, I have informal conversations with each student to make sure that he or she is on track with choosing an appropriate article.

Second, I ask them to provide a copy of their chosen article with their first assignment so that I can evaluate their article analysis. At this stage I provide written feedback addressing both the integrity of their analysis as well as organization, mechanics, and style.

Students receive feedback on assignment 2, not from me, but from their peer review group. Attached below is a copy of the review form that students are asked to complete in addition to written comments on the paper itself.

Third, I provide written feedback on a rough draft of their actual letter. I always make sure to return their rough drafts with plenty of time to revise before the final due date. (This can be tricky because it is crucial to get the letters submitted while the issue is still current, which means rapid turn-around time on my part.) Often the letter rough drafts only need to be cleaned up a bit before they are ready to be sent, but more commonly I get letters that read like tiny compressed essays where the writer is trying to cover every topic that he or she covered in assignment 2, rather than choosing the most compelling argument and developing just that one in 300 words. This isn't surprising since I do not provide written feedback on assignment 2 (for reasons mentioned below), but it makes this final round of feedback very important.

In the week before the final drafts are due, we spend one class period workshopping students' letters using an overhead projector to facilitate full-group discussion. This is very helpful because the work is placed in a "public" context, much as it would be if published in a newspaper or magazine. When contrasted with the other letters in the class and placed in the context of class readings (many of which are also editorials or letters to the editor), the student can see the difference between an essay for a class and

a letter for a newspaper, and this helps to shift his or her thinking about the purpose and execution of the piece.

Finally, letters under consideration for publication occasionally require additional revision and in that case I work with the student one-on-one to address the editor's comments.

## **REFLECTIONS ON THE SEQUENCE**

Throughout the three semesters that I have used this sequence (beginning in Fall 2005) I have continued to fine-tune the assignment descriptions, ordering, and feedback that I provide. In Fall 2006 I decided to include a round of peer review after assignment 2 because I found that when I gave them feedback on assignment 2, the students essentially were going forward with whatever argument *they* thought *I* thought was the best, rather than the one that was most important to them. This way their peers can offer a less onerous critique and help them figure out how to strengthen whichever argument the student decides to make in the letter.

I added the student-selected reading element this spring in order to help students become more familiar with the universe of periodicals they have to peruse *before* they choose their article. Since Fall 2006 I have made a point of scheduling my library session (with the wonderful Fred Muratori who came up with a great spoof of a Monopoly "Get Out Of Jail Free" card with Martha Stewart's head superimposed on it) earlier in the semester so that students learn how to access things like *The Wall Street Journal* and *Business Week* through the library gateway rather than through the paid subscription sites of the periodicals themselves. Every single semester students are awed by the CU Library resources, and this sequence gets them to dive in very early on.

Overall, I think this sequence works well because students choose topics in which they are genuinely interested and their writing has "real-world" significance.

So far 2 of my students have had their letters published. One student in Fall 2005 had his letter about farm subsidies published by the *Christian Science Monitor*, and in Fall 2006 a student had her letter about health benefits for domestic partners published by *Employee Benefit News*.

Below I have included all of the materials that are circulated to students.

## **ASSIGNMENTS AND SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS GIVEN TO STUDENTS**

### **Sequence Overview: Letter to the Editor Assignment Rationale**

Over the course of the next 3 weeks, you will be crafting a letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine in response to an editorial or opinion piece that deals with a subject relevant to this class. As you may know, letters to the editor have to be very short, often less than 300 words, and this is often much more difficult than writing a

longer essay where you have time and space to really explore your ideas. Learning to write a short piece, however, will help you in your longer essays as long-winded sentences and repetitive paragraphs often rob your argument of clarity and force. Applying the *principles* of short writing to each paragraph of a longer piece, therefore, will help to clarify your language and distill your argument to its essential elements. Elegance is a crucial aspect of writing as well, and in the upcoming assignments we will address the question of rhythm and flow within paragraphs. While it is important to be concise, simple declarative sentences are never enough on their own, and perhaps the most important aspect of good writing is to find ways to let *your* voice shine through without creating a thick haze of repetitive language, nor oversimplifying your prose to the exclusion of style and grace. This is a challenge for any writer, and so we are going to spend some time working on it.

### Part I: Analyzing your editorial

Choose an editorial or opinion article from *The Economist*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Financial Times*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Business Week*, *The Ithaca Journal*, *The Ithaca Times*, the *Cornell Daily Sun*, *Cornell Chronicle*, or another reputable source (subject to approval). Your article *must* be related to current events in business, economic policy, or corporate legal issues. Read the article closely, underlining and noting the **main argument**, **supporting statements**, **evidence**, and

**counterarguments**. Then write 3-5 pages in which you complete the following **3 tasks**:

- **summarize** the argument presented in the article. Make specific note of the author's **main argument**, **supporting statements**, and **evidence**, as well as the particular **counterarguments** that he or she addresses.
- **outline** your response to or critique of the article. With what elements do you agree or disagree? What kinds of supporting ideas and evidence might you use to reinforce your argument? What might some common disagreements be and how will you address them?
- **analyze** the article in terms of writing style and answer the following questions:
  - Does the author tend to write mostly in short, simple sentences, or in longer, more complex sentences—or a combination of both?
  - Does the author employ a variety of punctuation, such as colons, semi-colons, dashes or quotation marks?
  - What is the purpose of the writing in the passage? In other words, is the writing analytical, descriptive/explanatory, or persuasive?
  - What is the level of formality in the author's language? (For example, does he or she use slang?) What is the tone? (Does the author rely on emotional or political language, facts, and/or logical devices to make his or her point?)
  - Who do you imagine the primary audience(s) to be?

### Letter to the Editor Part II: Critique in Essay Form

In this assignment, you will have the chance to write a longer essay in which you fully explore the various aspects of critique that you want to include in your letter.

Depending on the depth of your chosen editorial and how much you have to say, this

essay could be anywhere from 2 to 5 pages (but I encourage you to *fully think through and explore the issues raised by your editorial*, which means that an essay only discussing issues directly addressed in the editorial would **not** be sufficient). What are the **broader social issues** raised by this editorial? Why are the specific events covered important for society to think about, beyond their immediate implications for the executives, employees, or consumers involved? If you are critical of the author's perspective, what specific points or arguments do you want to address and how might you support your ideas? If you are supportive, what broader social debate does this piece address, and what are its primary contributions? Why do you think it is important for society to think about *these issues in this particular way at this moment in time*?

You are encouraged to use concepts and ideas from class readings to analyze your editorial and the broader issues that come into play. This is an **analysis** assignment, not a **persuasion** assignment (that will come next). The reason for this order is that **the most persuasive arguments are ALWAYS based on well-reasoned and well-informed analysis. Without going through the analysis step, your persuasive arguments will most likely lack credibility and substance.**

In your essay, try to imitate the *structure* and *style* of the article you are responding to. How, where, and when does the author introduce the arguments or facts that are the basis of his or her commentary? How do the paragraphs unfold with respect to the author's overall argument? To what extent does the author address likely counterarguments? Does the author use emotional or dispassionate language? What are his or her tools of persuasion?

Depending on your depth of knowledge about the issue at hand, you will probably need to do some additional background reading on your chosen controversy. If you directly reference any of the additional readings, I expect you to cite them **in APA format** (see your handbook or the yellow handout from the library visit) and include a bibliography. Remember, for this paper you are not to limit yourself to the arguments you plan to make in your letter—you will only have a few hundred words for the letter, and purpose of this assignment is to stretch yourself a bit, to explore the issue at hand more thoroughly than you can in a short letter.

### Part III: Peer Review Feedback Sheet

Tuesday, February 13

Name of author \_\_\_\_\_

Name of reviewer \_\_\_\_\_

\*note: here "author" means the student, not the original author of the article

1) What are the main arguments of the article to which the author is responding?

2) What supporting or counterarguments does the author plan to pursue in his or her letter to the editor?

3) What recommendations would you make to the author as far as which of his or her arguments seem most compelling, and/or other suggestions of issues, angles, or opinions that he or she may want to consider?

4) Write at least 2 *substantial comments* on the content of the essay. Are there important arguments or counterarguments that the author has not, from your perspective, addressed? Are there any organizational or grammatical issues? Give ideas for making a point clearer or more convincing, a critique of fact or evidence, or highlight points that you think need to be developed further.

#### **Part IV: To The Editor...**

Go to the letter submission web page of the newspaper or magazine where you found your original article. What are the guidelines for letter submission? (Often, they will give a word limit, stipulate that you have to mention the title and date of the article to which you are responding, and the like). Following these guidelines, revise your essay in letter form using letters already published by that periodical as models.



You will probably have to further reduce the list of points that you want to make in your letter, and you will certainly need to apply the principles of constructing concise sentences. In writing a letter to the editor, you will most likely arrive at the point where you really need to get rid of 15 or 20 words, and this can be the hardest part of the revision process. This is where our classroom practice comes in handy.

I will hand your letters back to you on Thursday and you will have one last chance to revise them. By the following Tuesday, I expect you to have submitted your letter via email. Most periodicals will send you an automated acknowledgement of receipt thanking you for your submission. Please forward this to my email address.