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Newspaper Column Genre Study

Rationale

Are your students having difficulty producing meaningful, authentic work in your classroom? Are you and your class stuck in a time warp or are you discussing, reading, and writing about current issues? Do you long for your students to connect with an audience outside of classroom walls? A genre study on newspaper columns addresses all of these issues by having students write about current and relevant topics of their choosing and share their work with a vast audience, even worldwide.

What is a genre? Many of us English Language Arts educators would respond to this question with Charles Cooper's old definition of genre: "a type or category of text" (25). This is certainly the broad, undeveloped idea of what a genre is. Of course, this definition includes fiction, nonfiction, poetry, essays, novels, plays, and a few other "typical" genres that we often think of when we hear the word genre. But what about all of the writing we produce on a daily basis? This is where Cooper's second definition becomes helpful: genres are "types of writing produced every day in our culture, types of writing that make possible certain kinds of learning and social interaction" (25). This definition strives to include more "types of writing," thus extending what we think of as genres to include song lyrics, text messages, blogs, recipes, emails, and even lists. To take this one step further, Randy Bomer has his own definition of what a genre is: "an oft-overlooked cuing system in reading, [that] constrains our prediction, [and] lays down a track for our reading" (117). He also writes that "genres are conventions, and that means, they are social—socially defined and socially learned. Every community of people determines which kinds of writing count to that community" (119). What kinds of writing count in your classroom community? When asked to think of genres, unless one is a journalist, newspaper columns do not immediately come to mind. They deserve serious consideration, however, because they are a genre that is read at least weekly, if not daily, by many people, when many other genres are considered, yet are read far less often. Newspaper columns provide students with an opportunity to write authentically, which is the first step in choosing a genre, according to Bomer. Columns provide a great option for interesting students in their writing.

What is a genre study? According to Lucy McCormick Calkins, "A genre study is a structure we create in order to scaffold and support reading-writing connections" (365). A genre study is an in-depth study and analysis of one particular kind of text, in this case, a newspaper column. Why spend valuable class time doing a genre study with students? A genre study teaches students the specifics and the structure of the genre being studied and become comfortable and competent writers of it.

It is important for students to first read a plethora of examples of a genre before attempting to write it. This step helps students familiarize themselves with the conventions of the genre and get acquainted with its flow and organization, before they take on the task of writing. We have all experienced this. Would it not be difficult to write a sonnet if we had never before read poetry? For this reason, it is crucial for students to be readers of the genre before they become writers of it.

When teaching a genre study on newspaper columns, you are simultaneously preparing your students for the Regents exam, or any other high stakes test that they are preparing for.

When you teach your students how to develop a clear voice, yet limit the length of their writing to the word constraints in newspaper columns, you teach them how to communicate effectively through concise writing, which is a skill needed for their upcoming exams.

Throughout this genre study, I will show how to use the newspaper column as a part of your writing curriculum. I will first define the newspaper column and then explain the relationship between the newspaper columnist and his or her readers. I will then identify the parts of a newspaper column. Last, I will discuss how to use newspaper columns in the classroom.

Definition of Newspaper Column

According to Merriam-Webster, the definition of a “column” is “a vertical arrangement of items printed or written on a page,” and “one in a usually regular series of newspaper or magazine articles.” As found in the Cambridge dictionary, there are multiple types of newspaper columns: agony, “the part of a magazine or newspaper where letters from readers about their personal problems are printed, together with advice about how to deal with them”; critic reviews; editorial opinions; gossip, “the part of the newspaper in which you find stories about the social and private lives of famous people”; style; music and art critics; personal columns, “the part of a newspaper or magazine which contains short advertisements and private messages”; and many more.

Columnists include their opinions and feelings about the topic in which they are writing, and try to get the reader to think about the topic in question from a different perspective, whereas reporters simply state the facts. Columnists use facts, research, news, interviews, and social events as sources of input for their columns. Columns differ from all other types of writing in newspapers. Some articles only present the facts and try to remain as unbiased as possible. Other articles, like editorials, also contain opinions, but are different from a column in that an editorial is “a newspaper or magazine article that gives the opinions of the editors or publishers” (Merriam-Webster). According to the Writing Studio at Duke University, columns also differ from letters to the editor in that letters to the editor “are written by readers of a newspaper, magazine, or other source, on topics relevant to the publication’s audience. They address diverse topics...responses to opinions and stories previously put forth in the publication.” Newspaper columns are also different from an op-ed piece, or opinion editorial which, according to the Cambridge dictionary, is “a piece of writing which expresses a personal opinion and is usually printed in a newspaper opposite the page on which the editorial is printed.” Though op-ed pieces contain opinion, they often vary on topics, while columns tend to consistently return to the same topics.

Relationship: Newspaper and Column to Reader

Form, “the persisting visible structure of a newspaper,” is important to the newspaper and the column as well (Barnhurst 3). Form gives both the newspaper and the column a specific look, depending on who writes it and which school, company, or part of the country or world the newspaper or column come from. Form is what makes each paper “recognizable...day after day although its content changes” (Barnhurst 3). This sense of stability that is captured through form is important to the reader.

“The newspaper has always been a privileged form of communication in the United States” (Barnhurst 1). While newspapers are losing popularity throughout the world, the column has sustainability. According to The State of the News Media, which provides reports on American Journalism, newspaper circulation fell another 4.6% as of September 2009, yet the fifty most popular online news sites had traffic rise 27% in the past year (stateofthemedias.org).

Tangible newspapers are something more of the last century that are being left behind in favor of online newspapers: “In spite of all the efforts of individual men and generations of men to control [newspapers] and make [them] something after their own heart, [the newspaper] has continued to grow and change in its own incalculable ways” (Park 273). According to Stephen L. Vaughn, “Digital information technologies have enabled news providers a greater ability to provide information in a variety of ways on a continuing basis to news consumers. Alternatively, news consumers no longer must depend on news outlets based solely on geographical proximity or time...News consumers can read and view literally thousands of web sites throughout the world for information at any time of the day” (140). That being said, the column has longevity in a world where the Internet is winning the popularity contest on where and how people get their information.

A columnist has a special relationship with a reader. Since a columnist includes her opinions in her writing, the reader forms a relationship with the column because he or she agrees with what the columnists opinions are. This connection makes the reader eager to see what tomorrow’s, or next week’s or next month’s column will be about, since the reader will most likely side with the author again. There’s a “can’t have just one” type of relationship between a columnist and a reader who share the same opinions. Once you have read a column you like, it should not be easy to forget it. Columnists keep readers coming back for more. I read “Dear Prudence” each week, because I enjoy her sarcastic, yet helpful approach to situations when dedicated readers seek her advice.

Parts of a Newspaper Column

The newspaper column includes five parts: headline, byline, lead, explanation and additional information. The headline is a succinct statement meant to grab the reader’s attention enough that she will continue to read the column. The byline is where the name of the columnist is located. The first paragraph in a column is the lead. The lead informs the reader of the who, what, where, when, why and how. The lead should also be attention grabbing so that the reader wants to continue reading the rest of the column. The next paragraph, the explanation, develops the information from the lead paragraph. There may be quotes, facts, and other research included in the explanation section of the column. The additional information portion of the column is of smallest importance. This paragraph often includes mentioning a coinciding topic that occurred in the past, but has no real significance to the column. The column would not be any weaker without this last paragraph.

Genre Study: Start to finish

We will be using Randy Bomer’s procedue for conducting a genre study, while modifying some of his steps. Bomer is currently a professor of education at University of Texas at Austin, author of the popular *Time for Meaning: Crafting Literate Lives in Middle and High School*, was the former president of NCTE. The steps of the genre study are numbered, and Bomer’s guidelines are incorporated in bold-face font.

Before beginning a genre study, it is important that “**the genre is carefully chosen and is authentic.**” Bomer suggests that it must be a genre “that students may encounter in an authentic reading life” (122). He also thinks that it is important to “keep the boundaries of our study wide, so that students have plenty of choice about the particulars,” which a newspaper column genre study certainly allows for (122). It is likely that your students have read at least a typical newspaper article, and perhaps even a column. Students will start off learning the basic features of a column, but have absolute freedom over the type of column they choose to produce. This genre study incorporates all types of columns, but it may be useful to choose one specific

column, such as agony, and focus your genre study on the features of one particular style of newspaper column.

- 1.) The first step in our genre study is to distribute and introduce the students to the touchstone texts. By reading multiple examples of the genre, students can begin to grasp what elements a column contains, what it looks like, and begin to feel competent when reading the genre. Students should try to determine the features and characteristics of the genre after reading several well-written professional and student written examples. See the list of columns that will be used as touchstone texts for this genre study in Appendix A. As Bomer suggests, **“The class takes a very few texts as touchstone texts, to which students and teacher make frequent reference.”** Too many texts may overwhelm the students. For this reason, I have selected two professionally written models. The two from my longer list of examples will be: “Televisions” by Jason Love and “When worse comes to worst” by Michael Wilbon, given in Appendix B. While “Televisions” has some racy language, the hilarity really jumps off the page (or screen) for the reader. Wilbon’s column, while quite long, offers a look at why the Redskins are having such a bad season and some possible remedies on how to overcome the challenges they are facing. Love’s column uses humor to address the issue of televisions becoming a standard piece of equipment in almost every place we go or each room of our homes. I selected Wilbon’s column because student athletes will most likely be interested in a sports column and I selected Love’s humorous column for those who are not interested in sports. We will read them aloud, as a class, and then discuss what makes them “good” columns: both leave the reader with no questions, are concise yet descriptive, contain a stance/opinion, etc. We will focus on the differences between the two, but how they still both accomplish the task of being a column.
- 2.) Next, students will read a sample column that I drafted to make the components of a column explicit, since many professionally written columns do not follow the format that we will be using. Appendix C contains the sample column. Appendix D contains a diagrammed version of this column, in order for students to clearly see the characteristics within the column. This sample will help clarify students’ thoughts about the elements of a column and it will give them a true model to follow. They will also be able to use the labeled version of the column with corresponding handouts for the study.
- 3.) After reading the sample columns as a group, students will get in groups and read several of the other examples of suggested columns. Refer to Appendix A for these column suggestions. I expect that students would be able to read and diagram at least 3 sample columns during one class period. Students will attempt to flesh out the features and characteristics of columns in their groups through reading many columns and becoming more familiar with the genre.
- 4.) Students will share with the rest of their peers their findings about the genre of newspaper columns. These questions may help them get started with the activity:
 - What elements are common and included in each column?
 - What techniques are used by the columnists?
- 5.) Next, I will conduct a mini lesson on the components of a newspaper column in order to synthesize students’ findings and add the characteristics of the column that students did not recognize. Use Appendix E for this step (adapted from eHOW and eMints). Students will be using the language that columnists use when they are writing, instead of creating their own metalanguage as Bomer suggests using for describing the features within the

texts of the genre. Speaking of a genre study on poetry, Bomer explain, “My knowledge about poetry serves this purpose: to extend and build significance of students’ initial noticings, to help them name the techniques they see, so that they can use similar strategies in their own poems” (127). In a genre study on newspaper columns, I also find this to be true. Instead of calling the lead paragraph the “5 Ws paragraph,” because it contains the who, what, where, when, and why information, my students will be calling it the “lead paragraph,” because that is what columnists refer to it as, and we will be using the language of the genre as we study it. I think teachers will find that it is less confusing for students to use the actual language of the genre and that it helps them to feel that much more competent as writers of the genre.

- 6.) Students will now write. After reading many sample texts, we will respond to them. Students in our genre study will give the true “gut reaction” reader response about how each sample text made them feel and then a reader response about craft and style, because as Bomer says, **“the first lesson in any genre is its power to matter to readers.”** Some student responses to craft and style may mention the opinion included within the column the column’s structure. The main point Bomer tries to convey with this step is that we as teachers must allow our students to truly respond to the texts within the genre study in order for these texts to have any kind of meaning to the students. Bomer aims to have each student have two types of responses to the texts: “the first to the content and feeling of what they have read, the other to the writing as writing” because both types of response are “important in the lives of writers” (126). Students in our genre study respond as Bomer suggests they should. Students will be responding in their writers notebooks: another important tool in a genre study.

- 7.) **“Writers notebooks are tools for responding, collecting, thinking, and rehearsing.”**

Writers notebooks are one of the most important components of a genre study. Writers notebooks allow the students to adopt the role of a columnist. They can have fun with this activity! They will keep these notebooks as a columnist would. Students can write down something they overheard in a conversation and want to look into further later. They can write down ideas for a column that randomly come to mind and begin brainstorming and even begin drafting right in these little notebooks. Bomer has a list of questions we should all be asking ourselves during a genre study:

- What do writers in this genre do?
- What are the conditions under which they do it?
- What are the main things they have to pay attention to?

If we continue to revisit these questions as to not forget where we are going with the direction of the genre study, students will greatly benefit from writing “as a columnist” within the genre itself. These questions would also be particularly helpful for students to investigate and flesh out in their writers notebooks. The writers notebook should be fairly small so that it can be easily carried with a student at all times; this is the ideal scenario, of course. As Bomer says, “From the beginning of a genre study, while they are still searching for examples of this genre and examining touchstone texts, students begin keeping a notebook *as a maker of this kind of thing*...As they begin to understand what [newspaper columns] are made of, they will become better able to collect the kinds of entries that will prove most helpful to them when they make drafts of [newspaper columns]” (128). These writers notebooks provide a starting point for writers that are new to the genre and are a helpful tool for all writers to continue using throughout and

even after the genre study is complete. Introducing this writing tool to students and enthusiastically encouraging them to begin using it, teachers will change students' writing process and they will never be without an idea to write about in the future.

- 8.) The 6-point rubric, seen in Appendix F, will help to keep everyone on track with the same outcome in mind. Creating a rubric that is specific to the assignment helps us teachers to be explicit about what is expected of each writer in our classes. The rubric given in Appendix F gives students a clear idea of what they will need to produce by the time the class reaches the end of this genre study.
- 9.) After compiling a list of possible column topics on the whiteboard, I will urge students to choose a topic that they are familiar with since they will have to develop a stance or position in their column. According to Bomer, **“students are likely to revisit ‘old’ material.”** Bomer suggests that as writers we return to “a few central issues...again and again...in our writing lives” (129). With this, he asks us teachers to allow and encourage students to write about something they have written about in the past. This would be a good place for students to start. They could try to think about something they feel passionately about or a topic that they have enjoyed writing about in the past. Bomer thinks that if we truly “value their interests and obsessions as the bedrock of their learning,” that having students re-write about something in their life that they have already written about before is not only important, but crucial.
- 10.) Next **“students participate in selecting and evaluating the materials.”** This step will help students feel as though they have input on the genre study. Bomer says that the experience of finding examples “is so valuable for students...Learning from models does not have to mean that the teacher is the only one bringing models into the community” (124). In our genre study, students will find what they consider to be both a “good” column and a “bad” column for the type of column that they want to write. A helpful suggestion would be to have students look for good columns written by professional sources. Give them several suggestions of noteworthy newspapers and magazines. For the bad examples of columns, I would direct students to look at sites where student work is published. TeenInk has many columns written by students. Some of them are excellent, but a majority of the columns need much improvement. It is important to see what types of columns the students are interested in and if they understand what elements are included in a “good” column versus a “bad” one. They need to refer back to Appendix E, the characteristics handout, when searching for good and bad examples of columns. It benefits the teacher to include the student in this step as much as it benefits the student. They will use these columns that they find, along with the texts that I will provide as examples and non-examples of how to write their column.
- 11.) I will instruct them to choose a topic that they are already fairly familiar with since they need to take a position in this column. Allow students to make their topic choice today.
- 12.) We will then begin brainstorming, and possibly drafting, in our writers notebooks about our topic for our column. Since we all found both a “good” and a “bad” example of the column we chose to do, for example, gossip, politics, etc., and we will discuss what makes them either a good or bad example. Because, **“a genre study involves a deliberate interweaving of reading and writing,”** students participating in the newspaper column study will experience the interweaving of reading and writing throughout the length of the study. A genre study is meant to “unite reading and writing”

(127). In this genre study, students will be immersed in the newspaper column. They will have read the examples given to them by the teacher, sought out both good and bad examples of their own, and sifted through several “in between” types of columns in their search for the good and bad. They will be writing a column, with three drafts, for the class newspaper that we will be composing.

- 13.) Students will then share their topics and brainstorming ideas with the entire class and get peer feedback on the progression of their columns. See Appendix G for guided peer feedback in this step.
- 14.) Draft 1 is due.
- 15.) After students turn in their first draft, we will do a mini lesson on developing a lead paragraph. See Appendix H for this.
- 16.) We will continue with a mini lesson on writing headlines. See Appendix I for this step.
- 17.) Students will revise their columns using the peer feedback, the information on lead paragraphs and headlines from the mini lessons, and teacher modeling. During this step, the teacher should remember that she **“is a colearner.”** Although, as teachers, we are more experienced and accomplished consumers and writers of multiple genres, we also are not “masters” of each genre we come across. We may be more comfortable with one than another, but certainly we can learn alongside our students during this genre study. Bomer suggests working to improve our “own writing in the genre we are studying” (124) He says, “Often, I make overheads of my drafts for minilessons or even try to compose or revise right on the transparency in front of the class” (124). This is also a good example of teacher modeling healthy writing practices for the students. They can see us teachers struggle the same way they do, but work through our thoughts to revise their work into something better. I will take my first draft of a column and revise it in front of the students, using an Elmo or overhead projector, with their help. After I revise mine, they will revise their drafts.
- 18.) Draft two is due.
- 19.) Students will peer review and edit each other’s columns in groups no larger than four. It is best to keep the groups small so that students do not feel overwhelmed in trying to help one another. Use Appendix J for this step.
- 20.) I will do a mini lesson on word choice. See Appendix K for this step.
- 21.) After peer review and the mini lesson on word choice, students will work to revise and edit their second drafts.
- 22.) Final draft due.
- 23.) Publish the students’ columns in the class newspaper we’ve created and submit their columns to the school newspaper for publishing.
- 24.) Reflect on the genre study. Use Appendix L for this step.

Importance of a Rubric

Supplying students with a rubric at the beginning of the genre study is important because they need to know what is expected of them from the start. They will have explicit guidelines for producing their columns. If they seem to be getting off track, or if you do, refer back to the rubric to keep everyone on the same page with the same outcome in mind. We all need a clear description of the goal that we are working toward, and giving students this rubric on the first day of the genre study will clear up any confusion they have about what they will be doing throughout the study.

NYS Regents Examination Preparation

I would also give students a way to connect this genre study to the Regents Exam they are expected to take. Here is the example I would give them from a previous Regents Exam given in June 2009:

Part B

Directions: Read the text and study the table on the following pages, answer the multiple-choice questions, and write a response based on the situation described below. You may use the margins to take notes as you read and scrap paper to plan your response.

The Situation: Your local newspaper is publishing a special edition in honor of World Environment Day. You have decided to write an article for the publication describing the benefits of using bicycles for commuting and what community leaders need to do to encourage more commuting by bicycle.

Your Task: Using relevant information from *both* documents, write an article for your local newspaper's World Environment Day special edition in which you describe the benefits of using bicycles for commuting and what community leaders need to do to encourage more commuting by bicycle.

Guidelines:

Be sure to

- Tell your audience what they need to know about the benefits of using bicycles for commuting
- Describe what community leaders need to do to encourage more commuting by bicycle
- Use specific, accurate, and relevant information from the text *and* the table to support your description
- Use a tone and level of language appropriate for an article for a local newspaper
- Organize your ideas in a logical and coherent manner
- Indicate any words taken directly from the text by using quotation marks or referring to the author
- Follow the conventions of standard written English.

This allows students to see that while this is an authentic genre that they will encounter in their everyday lives, it will also benefit them on the state assessments that are required of them. This is directly related. Although this Regents sample discusses this as a newspaper article, they have to take a stance and include opinions within their writing, which is what students are doing in their column writing.

Closure

I believe that using this genre study in your classroom will be worthwhile for students. Writing a column allows them the opportunity to write about a topic of interest to them, be clear and concise in their communication skills, and use their own opinions in their writing, which is not often allowed in typical genres taught in the classroom. This genre is the perfect way to engage students in meaningful writing in your classroom.

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http://quest.arc.nasa.gov/aero/wright/teachers/pdf/language/Newspaper_Article.pdf

Appendix A

Sample Texts:

Sports:

- Bill Plaschke “Bradford finally delivers on his promise”
<http://www.latimes.com/sports/college/usc/la-sp-plaschke25-2009oct25,0,7271146.column>
- Michael Wilbon “When worse comes to worst”
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/27/AR2009102703815.html?nav=emailpage>
- Jemele Hill “Ego fuels Dez Bryant’s suspension”
<http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/page2/story?page=hill/091030&sportCat=nfc>

Food:

- Corby Kummer “Two for the table”
<http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/corby/ct2003-12.htm>
- Eddy Browning “Cornbread- in all its glory”
<http://www.newbernsj.com/articles/cornbread-49013-glory-grandmother.html>
- Lindsey Mathes “Fresh, tasty and inexpensive at the Farmer’s Market”
<http://www.newbernsj.com/articles/farmer-48742-love-cooking.html>

Fashion:

- Arielle Gardner “Fall 2009 Hermes Looks for Less”
<http://www.stylecaster.com/news/4837/fall-2009-hermes-looks-for-less>
- Tracy Lomrantz “Reese Witherspoon’s Recent Red Carpet Chic Streak: Which Look Do You Like Best?”
<http://www.glamour.com/fashion/blogs/slaves-to-fashion/2009/10/reese-witherspoons-recent-red.html>

Humor:

- Jason Love “Televisions”
<http://www.jasonlove.com/blogs/humor-columns/2009/02/televisions.aspx>
- Bill Ervolino “Toaster oven maintains a warm place in his heart”
http://www.northjersey.com/arts_entertainment/ervolino/65121887.html

Politics:

- John Stossel “A Nobel Prize for Showing That Freedom Works”
http://townhall.com/columnists/JohnStossel/2009/10/21/a_nobel_prize_for_showing_that_freedom_works
- Molly Ivins “Bush-hater strikes again”
<http://www.freepress.org/columns/display/1/2003/775>

Advice/Agony:

- Dear Prudence “Tickled-Off by Tickle Attacks”
<http://www.slate.com/id/2233828/>
- Dear Abby “Multitasking daughter is driving toward disaster”
http://www.uexpress.com/dearabby/?uc_full_date=20091030

Student Written:

- CatCat “Twilight on Inequality”
http://www.teenink.com/opinion/sports_hobbies/article/82295/Twilight-on-Equality/
- Gallagher “Steroids or the Hall?”
http://www.teenink.com/opinion/sports_hobbies/article/137369/Steroids-or-the-Hall/

- Sarah S. Orcutt “Unshelving Classic Books”
http://www.teenink.com/opinion/sports_hobbies/article/78700/Unshelving-Classic-Books/
- ImmortalDay “Seven Signs of a Gentleman”
http://www.teenink.com/opinion/love_relationships/article/135470/Seven-signs-of-a-gentlemen/
- VirginiaHeart “Why are boys so confusing?”
http://www.teenink.com/opinion/love_relationships/article/133513/Why-are-boys-so-confusing/
- Morgie7<3 “Popular Girls in UGGS”
http://www.teenink.com/opinion/love_relationships/article/99659/Popular-Girls-in-UGGS/
- Writingis4ever “STOP, STOP, STOP...”
http://www.teenink.com/opinion/sports_hobbies/article/82354/STOP-STOP-STOP/
- LilaEnvy “Kanye West vs. Taylor Swift”
http://www.teenink.com/opinion/movies_music_tv/article/135419/Kanye-West-vs-Taylor-Swift/

Appendix B

Touchstone Texts:

Televisions by Jason Love



Is it just me, or are TVs taking over the universe? They're popping up in gas stations, waiting rooms, supermarkets, banks, beauty salons, HOTEL BATHROOMS. I myself don't need a bathroom TV because I keep one in my underwear.

"For those of you who owned a Walkman and were at least mildly aware of the Watchman, Sony brings you ... The Crotchman."

The locker room at 24-Hour Fitness plays two TVs at the same time, which is kind of like being raped in the ears. Last week it was Fox versus ETV...

"Oprah lost 16 pounds to Al Qaeda, who destroyed the Grammy chances of our nation's leaders in their incestuous love triangle. Call now!"

One night I got trapped with "The Biggest Loser," a reality show named after the people who watch it. The important thing is that we are never, for one second, without a talking head.

One day you'll go to leave a room and the TV will stand up tall like Julius Caesar and say, "Don't you give your back to ME!"

At Friday's, I saw a husband and wife watching TV over one another's heads. Makes you wonder how they got together in the first place.

"Well, I stretched my neck to see *American Idol*; she thought I was looking at *her*; and uh, the rest is history."

My cousin placed his baby's crib beside the TV because the baby found it comforting. We all look forward to junior's first word: "Toyotathon!"

We can't even sit down to Thanksgiving without a football game in the background. FYI, remote control goes *inside* the soup spoon.

Even when you mute the TV, it types out a transcript like a tyrant refusing to be gagged. "Don't ... you give ... your back ... to ME."

On the bright side, people are reading again. So it goes.

Albertson's supermarket plays tabloid TV above the magazine rack, and I, for one, am embarrassed to know what Jennifer thinks of Angelina. High school never ends.

And commercials. Sigh. They say TV is free, but we pay for it every time we hum a jingle. Somewhere in the distance, the Dalai Lama is in the lotus position trying to not think about what he'd do for a Klondike bar.

In concert, John Mellencamp began the song "Cherry Bomb" by saying, "I hope this one's good enough to someday be on a Pop Tarts commercial."

And let me tell you, it takes a big man to admit that he paid to see John Cougar Mellencamp.

Have you ever walked in on children who've stayed up all night watching TV? Their eyes gloss over with that soulless, homogenized look of certain congressmen. Finally they pass out, remote control in hand, while their clicker finger amazingly keeps changing channels.

At least they're not watching daytime TV, pork rinds for the brain.

"Yes, yer honor, he did gone slap me in fronta his ho' girlfriend."

On *General Hospital*, I saw a doctor being played by someone like Keanu Reeves, only stoned-er.

"Don't make me compromise the ethicality of this hospital, dude."

That's why we call them soap operas: Because afterward you need to shower. And if you ever find yourself bleeding to death in the ER, it's because your doctor is groping a candy striper with whose sister he is unwittingly having a baby.

I turn off the gym's locker room TVs every time I go and feel sorry for the guy who ever tries to stop me, because that will be a long, emotional conversation. I fantasize about smashing the TV, but then I remember Gandhi and Martin Luther King and the cost of bail.

When I can't reach the TVs, I dress as quickly as possible to minimize the damage:

"Local militia extend money-back guarantees to cheating housewives for their overtime victory in prescription coverage. Call now!"

Then I go home and shower for a long, long time.

When worse comes to worst



Quarterback Jason Campbell and the Redskins are not in a position to make a quick fix after their latest loss, which leaves them at 2-5 heading into the bye week. (John McDonnell/the Washington Post)

By [*Michael Wilbon*](#)

Tuesday, October 27, 2009

So what now? A consultant to call signals to prevent Antwaan Randle El from letting a punt hit him in the face mask? How about a special play-caller to keep DeSean Jackson from running 20 yards past Chris Horton? Surely, Buddy Ryan would rather call some defensive signals than play

You know what the Washington Redskins need most after a 27-17 loss to the Philadelphia Eagles? A vacation. They need to get the hell out of Dodge, leave the playbook at home, get away from the coaches, from the executive vice president of football operations, from the owner, from the TV and the newspapers. Never has a team been more in need of a bye week. I know the Redskins must be tired because it's exhausting just watching them.

In a season characterized, in part, by truly stinky teams, the Redskins are a really truly stinky team, just like the Bucs, Titans, Rams, Chiefs and Lions.

There's no easy fix, no "gotcha!" answer. The owner isn't going to solve this overnight. Neither will the executive vice president of football operations, the head coach, the Bingo-caller-turned-play-caller, the screamers on sports talk radio nor the columnists in this newspaper.

An extra set of eyes isn't going to immediately clean up this mess, nor is outside interference or an owner's fat wallet. A bye week won't fix much, but a break from dreadful football is required anyway.

For the record, the offense was every bit as sickly with Sherman Lewis calling the plays as it was with Jim Zorn calling 'em. The line struggled.

The QB struggled. The runners struggled. The receivers struggled. There wasn't anything new that seemed inspired or ingenious. It was a bad football team that was a little bit worse than it was last week, and perhaps just taking a few days off will help a bunch of football players like it helps anybody for whom work isn't going especially well.

I talked recently to a veteran NFL player, a man who in double-digit years in the NFL has played for dreadful teams and in the Super Bowl. He's watched the Redskins here and there this season and has a good idea of what's going on day in, day out. He thinks a great many of the players are simply dispirited. He doesn't think that they've quit or dislike their coach or any of the grandiose overstated junk that people outside the locker room might lazily come up with.

He reminded me that playing pro football, win or lose, is a career. And no matter what players tell the media or even themselves, it's difficult to come to any workplace when things are awful. Reputations and the size of paychecks can't change that. You can try as hard as you can, harder than you even thought you could, and lose. Then you feel worse the next day, and the next week and as long as the losing continues until teams don't even resemble what they were when the season started.

Now and then, teams lift themselves out of it. Way more often than not, teams require massive changes to reverse fortune. Think Miami Dolphins. They got Bill Parcells to run the whole show, and he changed *everything*, and I do mean everything. And he knew enough to make the right

changes. The Dolphins, completely overhauled like one of those "Extreme Makeover" shows, went from 1-15 to the playoffs in a single season.

The Redskins are going to require a similar kind of Extreme Makeover, not just a guy coming in and calling a bunch of plays. That's not comprehensive change; it's silliness instituted by people who ought to know better. Don't expect to read a detailed analysis of Sherm Lewis's play-calling here because nothing so minute in the middle of this big mess even matters, although we have to consider the possibility that Zorn's play-calling was adjusted to keep opposing defenses from sacking Campbell to death.

Even if Sherm Lewis had been Sandy Koufax and called a perfect game -- and he surely did not against the Eagles -- then what about the botched punt? What about the defense's inability to stop two very long Philly plays for touchdowns?

On a night when the Eagles were quite beatable, the Redskins were down 27-7 pretty quickly. Donovan McNabb, his own offensive line struggling, was way off target on a lot of passes. Brian Westbrook, Philly's second-best offensive player, suffered a concussion early in the game and was done (thankfully, the DeMatha grad stood on the sideline and cheered on his team despite the shot he took to the head). Philly's attempt to incorporate Michael Vick into some sort of Wildcat offense seems at this point to be a joke. You want to see a Wildcat offense, take a look at what the Dolphins do with Ronnie Brown, Ricky Williams and Pat White taking snaps from the shotgun. Vick, on the other hand, isn't doing anything but picking up rust in Philly. The Eagles coaches ought to be able to come up with something more creative than that. Hell, I think I could do better on the drive home from FedEx.

The Eagles aren't made of championship stuff this year, but they're significantly better than the Redskins, who go rather depressingly into their bye week. You can never really get away from the spotlight in the NFL because pro football is the national pastime. Even when you stink, people want to know what you're doing or not doing every day of the week. Maybe, after some time off, the Redskins will come back and one morning, unbeknownst to anybody, put one foot in front of the other. Maybe after doing it once, they'll do it again and win a game that might not matter to the standings but will matter to people who inhabit the workplace, who can go home one night feeling really good about what happened at the gig that day.

You can spend your time arguing about whether the coach should be fired this week or in four weeks or in six. The changes that will ultimately change losing to winning need to be big ones initiated and implemented by people who have spent their time doing football things, not marketing or making money or playing bingo in blissful retirement.

Appendix C

Sample Gossip Column

Jon & Kate Spend Anniversary Together—In Jail!

Courtney Maida

Are Jon and Kate mending their seemingly broken relationship? Not a chance! Jon and Kate Gosselin spent last Saturday night, June 12, in the Berks County Jail in Pennsylvania because when Jon tried to enter the couples' shared home, a domestic dispute occurred. The couple was arguing about Jon's recent lack of responsibility and the argument escalated to loud yelling. That is when neighbors called the police and Jon and Kate were hauled off to jail for the night.

Jon and Kate have been ever-present in the media within the last year. Every tabloid at the supermarket is plastered with unhappy photos and scandalous captions. The couple filed for divorce on June 22 of this year and there have been problems ever since. They share custody, which constantly becomes an issue when one parent cannot follow through on their commitment. Kate always has a bitter attitude because Jon is moving on. There have been

rumors of a serious relationship with another woman since Jon and Kate's split. I'm starting to become fed up with the Jon and Kate mania! Enough is enough! Every news station: celebrity, world, and local, has a story about Jon and Kate. The tabloids are running wild and profiting like crazy. And I'm losing interest—quickly. Let them be. They have personal problems that are not going to be helped by the constant scrutiny and presence of the media.

Jon and Kate should cool it on the drama and the media should give them a break. This sort of thing never ends well, but we don't really need to be as exposed to the duration of their separation and divorce as we have been up through now.

Appendix D

Example Diagrammed Gossip Column

HEADLINE

Jon & Kate Spend Anniversary Together—In Jail!

Courtney Maida

BYLINE

WHO

Are Jon and Kate mending their seemingly broken relationship? Not a chance! While Jon

WHEN

WHERE

and Kate Gosselin spent last Saturday night, June 12, in the Berks County Jail in

LEAD

D

WHAT

Pennsylvania because when Jon tried to enter the couples' shared home, a domestic dispute

occurred. They couple was arguing about Jon's recent lack of responsibility and the

WHY

argument escalated to loud yelling. That is when neighbors called the police and Jon and

HOW

Kate were hauled off to jail for the night.

OTHER FACTS AND DETAILS THE READER NEEDS TO ANSWER QUESTIONS FROM
LEAD PARAGRAPH

Jon and Kate have been ever-present in the media within the last year. Every tabloid at the

supermarket is plastered with unhappy photos and scandalous captions. The couple filed for

divorce on June 22 of this year and there have been problems ever since. They share

custody, which constantly becomes an issue when one parent cannot follow through on their

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commitment. Kate always has a bitter attitude because Jon is moving on. There have been

OPINION OF WRITER

rumors of a serious relationship with another woman since Jon and Kate's split. I'm starting

to become fed up with the Jon and Kate mania! Enough is enough! Every news station:

celebrity, world, and local has a story about Jon and Kate. The tabloids are running wild and

profiting like crazy. And I'm losing interest—quickly. Let them be. They have personal

problems that are not going to be helped by the constant scrutiny and presence of the media.

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Jon and Kate should cool it on the drama and the media should give them a break. This sort

of thing never ends well, but we don't really need to be as exposed to the duration of their

separation and divorce as we have been up through now.

Appendix E

What is a newspaper column?

Adapted from eMints “Wright”-ing Prompt

http://quest.arc.nasa.gov/aero/wright/teachers/pdf/language/Newspaper_Article.pdf

DEFINITION:

“an article giving opinions and perspectives”

FUNCTION:

-to inform and entertain readers

-to make others care about their opinions and perspectives

A NEWSPAPER COLUMN TYPICALLY CONTAINS FIVE PARTS, IN THIS ORDER:

- **Headline:** This is a short, attention-grabbing statement about the event or topic.
- **Byline:** This tells who wrote the story; the author.
- **Lead paragraph:** This has the five Ws (who, what, where, when, why) and how.
- **Explanation:** The writer must determine what other facts and details the reader should know. The writer must include enough information to answer all questions the reader might have after reading the lead paragraph. The opinion of the writer should appear in this paragraph.

- **Additional information:** This information is least significant. If the column is too long, this portion of the column may be cut off without affecting or rewriting the rest of the article.

THERE ARE MULTIPLE TYPES OF NEWSPAPER COLUMNS:

- agony/advice
- gossip
- style/fashion
- personal columns
- sports

COLUMNS DIFFER FROM ALL OTHER TYPES OF WRITING IN NEWSPAPERS:

- News articles- only present the facts and try to remain as unbiased as possible
- Editorials- contain opinions, but are different from a column because they give the opinions of the editors or publishers
- Letters to the editor- are written by readers of a newspaper, magazine, or other source, on topics relevant to the publication's audience. They address opinions and stories previously put forth in the publication.
- Op-ed, or opinion editorial- a piece of writing which expresses a personal opinion and is usually printed in a newspaper opposite the page on which the editorial is printed. Though they contain opinion, they often vary on topics, while columnists tend to write consistently about the same topics.

Appendix F
6-point Rubric for Newspaper Columns:

Quality	6	5	4	3	2	1
Meaning	The author has a meaningful, in-depth explanation of the topic. Very engaging.	The author has a thorough understanding and explanation of the column topic. Engaging.	The author has a basic understanding and explanation of the column topic. Somewhat engaging.	The author has a basic understanding and explanation of the column topic, but does not engage the reader.	The author has an inaccurate understanding and explanation of the column topic. Does not engage the reader.	The author has no understanding and inadequate explanation of the column topic.

Development	Develops ideas thoroughly, yet in a concise manner.	Develops idea thoroughly. Concise, but could be clearer.	Develops some ideas but not all. Could be more concise.	Develops some ideas, but minimally. Not very concise.	Ideas are underdeveloped. Not concise.	No evidence of developing ideas.
Organization	The column contains a headline, byline, lead, explanation and additional information paragraph. Maintains a clear focus and transitions with ease throughout the column.	The format of a column is followed. Transitions are smooth.	The format of a column is followed in order, but lacks a smooth flow.	The format of a column is not followed in order and is lacking one part. The column does not flow.	The format of a column is not followed in order and is lacking two parts. The column is illogical.	The format of a column is not followed and is lacking more than two parts. Column is incomprehensible.
Language Use	Uses an audience appropriate tone, high level vocabulary, and varies sentence structure for effect. Word choice, based on lesson, is excellent.	Uses an audience appropriate tone, good vocabulary, and some varied sentence structure. Word choice is good.	Shows awareness of audience, uses good vocabulary, lacks varied sentence structure. Word choice is satisfactory.	Shows little awareness of audience, uses average vocabulary, and lacks varied sentence structure. Word choice is lacking and needs more work.	Shows no awareness of audience, uses minimal vocabulary, and simple sentences. Student attempted, but was not successful in using effective words.	Language use makes column difficult to follow. Use of unsuitable vocabulary and sentence structure. Word choice was ignored.
Conventions	Has no spelling, grammar, or punctuation errors.	Has no more than 2 spelling, grammar, or punctuation errors.	Has no more than 4 spelling, grammar, or punctuation errors.	Has several spelling, grammar, or punctuation errors that slightly hinder comprehension.	Has spelling, grammar, or punctuation errors that greatly hinder comprehension.	Has spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors that mar comprehension.

Appendix G

GUIDED PEER FEEDBACK

1. What could the author do to develop this initial idea for the column further?

2. What resources could the author use to gather more information about this topic/event?

3. Did the author answer ALL parts of the lead paragraph (who, what, when, why, where, and how)? If not, what does he/she still need to explain?

4. Is the author's word choice effective? Why or why not?

5. Is the author's opinion or stance explicit? If not, what could he or she do to achieve this?

6. What other comments/advice do you have for the author about his/her column idea?

Appendix H

Developing a Lead Paragraph

Adapted from the Washington Post Lesson on developing leads by Marc Fisher

After filling in each of the boxes with the correct and complete information, begin drafting your lead paragraph on the back of this paper.

1.) **WHO** is the column about?

http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=4631; <http://www.snn->

2.) **WHAT** happened?

4. Ask a question.

3.) **WHERE** did the action take place?

• Does the headline express the main idea of the column?

4.) **WHEN** did the action take place?

Would you read a column with this headline?

5.) **WHY** did the action take place?

6.) **HOW** did the event happen?

Appendix J

PEER REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Does the headline immediately demand your attention? If not, what are some suggestions on how to improve the headline?
2. Did the author include ALL parts of the lead paragraph (who, what, when, why, where, and how)? If not, what does he/she still need to explain?
3. Has the author answered all of your questions in the explanation paragraph? Does the explanation paragraph contain enough facts, details, and information that you are satisfied as a reader? If not, how can the author improve this? What do you still have questions about?
4. Could the additional information paragraph be left off without it affecting the rest of the article? If not, how can the author fix this?
5. Are all parts of the newspaper column included? Are they in order? Refer to the rubric and give your peer a sample grade.

Appendix K

MINI LESSON ON WORD CHOICE

Choosing words, especially in a newspaper column, is extremely important. Your columns must be concise and are limited to 400 words maximum, thus your word choice is crucial to making your column the best it can possibly be.

Revise the following example sentences to make them more vivid and specific. Use a thesaurus if you are unsure of a replacement word to use.

Example: The room did not smell good.

Revision: The science lab reeked of something hideous and rotten.

- **Example: She made a dessert.**
- **Revision:**

- **Example: The dog barked at something.**
- **Revision:**

- **Example: The house was not clean.**
- **Revision:**

- **Example: I went to the store for a snack.**
- **Revision:**

Now, use the thesaurus and make the same types of revisions in your newspaper columns.

Appendix L

GENRE STUDY REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Did this genre study challenge you in any ways? In what ways? If not, why didn't it challenge you?
2. What did you learn about yourself as a reader of this genre?
3. What did you learn about yourself as a writer of this genre?
4. What is one new skill you learned during this genre study that you will be able to use in other types of writing, not just newspaper columns?
5. What did you like about this genre study?
6. What did you dislike about this genre study?
7. If you could do the project again, what would you choose to change about it?