
	University of North Carolina at Wilmington Department of Communication Studies Communication 290: Rhetoric of Popular Culture Spring 2006 section 001	
Course Information		
Professor: Rick Olsen	Office: 231 Leutze Hall	
Phone: 962-3710	Office Hours: 11-12 MWF 9-11 TR. Feel free to drop by or schedule an appointment.	
Email: olsenr@uncwil.edu		
Class Time: MWF 10-10:50	Class Location: LH 139	

“Generally speaking, the study of **rhetoric** is the study of the force or power of discourse—of the ways in which texts affect the beliefs, attitudes, values, perceptual orientations, and behaviors of their consumers.” Leah Vande Berg, Lawrence A. Wenner and Bruce E. Gronbeck, *Critical Approaches to Television* (1998, p. 103)

“Whatever is **popular** is by definition liked by many people—which is reason for some to argue that it’s good . . . and for others that it’s bad (it’s liked by so many of the *wrong* sort of people so I shouldn’t be seen to like it). But a case for the importance of examining popular culture may be based on its persistence: Specific popular culture texts may not last long, but popular culture *itself* is extraordinarily durable and tells us a great deal about the culture that sustains it.” Gary Thompson, *Rhetoric Through Media* (1997, p. 353)

“**Culture** is the vast set of artifacts that nurture and influence the development and growth of people. . . . It is the socially generated symbolic strategies for manifesting artifacts as ‘real’ objects, actions, and events with ranges of meaning. I wish to stress that a given person is usually influenced by, or is a part of, more than one culture.” Barry Brummett, *Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Culture* (1991, p.xix)

“**Culture** is the constant process of producing meaning of and from our social experience, and such meanings necessarily produce a social identity for the people involved. . . . Within the production and circulation of these meanings lies pleasure.” John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (1989, p. 1)

Course Completion and Gateway Requirements: Classes typically coded “COM Majors ONLY” may occasionally be opened to PCOM majors or all students. This may most commonly occur during Summer terms. Please be aware, however, that to become a full-status COM major, you **MUST** complete the gateway courses (COM 105 and COM 200) **SUCCESSFULLY**, i.e., with a grade of “B” or higher in each. If you do **NOT** successfully complete those two courses, you cannot earn full COM major status, even if you complete one or more COM classes apart from the gateway courses.

Syllabus

Course Description: We are surrounded by images, texts and sounds of popular culture: Radios, CDs, tapes, televisions, VCRs and DVDs, movie theaters, Internet, all bring messages for us to consume. Some contain explicit arguments (“Buy a car from D & E Dodge!”) or implicit ones (Sexual passion disappears after you get married). This course explores concepts, theories and critical methods that help us examine popular culture and become insightful critics and consumers of popular culture. Your practices as communicators

(producers and consumers) should be guided by the theories that have emerged from our systematic study of communication: Theory informs practice!

This class moves quickly. Some of the text will be discussed in class. However, you are responsible for all the readings as assigned. Readings **and** lecture material are fair game for quizzes. Please come in with questions from the reading: What does it mean? How does it apply? How do we do it? What does it look like? These are all good questions and will help make the class meaningful for you.

Course Objectives: After completing this course the successful student will:

1. demonstrate knowledge of core concepts (master vocabulary);
2. demonstrate ability to apply course concepts,
3. demonstrate ability to carry out secondary research,
4. demonstrate ability to orally present ideas and facilitate class activities
5. demonstrate ability to write effectively using formal academic style

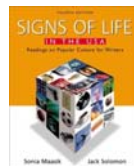
Course Policies: You are expected to attend every class period. However, since life happens, you are allowed three absences without automatic penalty as personal days. Use them wisely if at all.

Number of Absences Recorded	Highest Grade You Can Earn (regardless of grades earned on assignments)
No absences up to three absences	A
Four or five absences	B
Six absences	C
Seven absences	D
More than seven	F

No make-up quizzes or assignments will be given unless there are unique circumstances and such circumstances are handled responsibly by the student. Any plagiarism or other forms of cheating will result in failure for the course.

Honor Code: “It shall be the responsibility of every faculty member, student, administrator and staff member of the university community to uphold and maintain the academic standards and integrity of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington” (1997-1998 *Student Handbook and Code of Student Life* p. 91). All student work and conduct must be in accordance with the academic honor code and other codes informing the university community.

Text: Required: Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon (2003). Signs of Life In the USA (4th ed.). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin.



A word to the wise: Read the book on time and always be asking yourself how this applies to your *understanding and practice* of popular culture and communication.

Assignments and Grading: There are 400 points available for the course. You may keep up with your grades by dividing the points you've earned by the points available so far. The result (such as .832) will be a number corresponding to your percentage. The assignments are as follows:

Assignment	Point Value
10 Quizzes @ 10 points each	100
Field Paper	25
Planning Paper for Class Sessions	50
Leading Class Sessions	50 (40 shared, 10 individual)
Peer Evaluations	25
Draft of Final Paper	25
Final Paper	100
Presentation of Paper	25
Class Participation	This will be used to help determine +/- situations

I will be using a modified plus/minus system.

Percentage of points earned	Final Grade
92% or more	A
90-91%	A-
87-89%	B+
84-86%	B
80-83%	B-
77-79%	C+
74-76%	C

Portfolio Artifacts: One of the culminating experiences of a communication studies degree is the completion of COM 490 *Discipline Capstone*, a course that may include the preparation of a personal portfolio to organize and showcase your abilities. I encourage you to retain items from this class, whether produced independently or in groups, for inclusion as portfolio artifacts. Beyond the *Capstone* class, your portfolio may prove a valuable tool as you seek entry into a graduate program or employment in your areas of specialization.

“The trick is to learn how to execute semiotic analysis and then to go further—to say something significant about human communication as a result of one’s careful attention to coding.”

Malcolm O. Sillars & Bruce E. Gronbeck, Communication Criticism: Rhetoric, Social Codes, Cultural Studies.

“[Good critics] draw upon existing theories of rhetoric, which essentially are classification schemes, to guide their analysis, then push their knowledge further through their creative application of theory and their own inferences drawn from careful study of messages (Black, 1965, p. 9).”

Mark Stoner & Sally Perkins, Making Sense of Messages
A Critical Apprenticeship in Rhetorical Criticism.

Assignment Descriptions

I offer these assignments all at once not to cause overload but so that you can manage your time as you need to. I realize that this may not be the only course you are taking and want you to be able to take the lead in owning your education and managing your coursework. If you have questions about any of these assignments be sure to ask them. Really, go ahead and ask.

Quizzes: Quizzes are designed to see that you've read the text with comprehension and paid attention in class—including peer presentations. The quizzes will be mostly true/false and multiple-choice.

Field Paper: You will team up with 1-2 classmates and analyze either Mayfaire or Independence Mall. You will focus your analysis on one key insight that emerges from your observations and discussion. Have fun, make some friends, but really polish one key insight. See detailed assignment description.

Leading a Class Session: Your group will be charged with leading one class session. You will need to design discussion questions, activities, media, etc. to use during the day you are leading the class. You can make some use of existing videos provided it is well thought out and well integrated into your plan. Plan an email to the entire class on how to best prepare for your sessions beyond doing the reading. See detailed assignment description.

Planning Paper for Class Session: The Wednesday before you lead the class session, your group will hand in a detailed planning paper for the session. See detailed assignment description.

Peer Evaluation: The class period following your presentation you should present a one-page single-spaced memo that addresses the following issues: 1) strengths and weaknesses of class session, 2) strengths and areas for improvement in your group process, 3) peer evaluation on 1-10 scale for each group member including yourself with 1-2 sentence justification for each rating.

Final Paper: The final paper will incorporate some of the course concepts we encounter into an insightful critique of a current or historical artifact of popular culture. That artifact might be a broad shift in popular culture (the emergence of “new country”) or a very specific artifact such as the final episode of *Sex in the City*. The paper should make an argument: There should be a claim and support for that claim. That support should come from secondary research as well as concepts from the course. The **body** of the paper should be 7-10 pages in length and integrate no less than 12 sources. It must adhere to either APA style. We will talk more about this paper as we go, but be sure to ask questions as well! You may elect to carry out the term project in two-person teams. The requirements for this are elevated slightly: the body of the paper should be 8-10 pages and integrate 15 or more sources minimum and include a peer review of each team member.

Presentation of Final Paper: The last week of class and exam period will be devoted to formal presentation of the final papers. You will want to be able to talk fluently about your paper and provide a 4-6 minute speech based on your research. This speech should demonstrate the skills you developed in COM 110. You should incorporate visual/audio aids where appropriate. Teams should balance the presentation between both partners. There will be discussion of the presentations at the end of each class session.



Class Participation: Participation is a factor of two things: Did you attend class? Was the class better in some respects due to your membership? In the answer to these two questions lies my assessment of your participation that will help determine plus/minus issues in grading. Poor participation can negatively impact your grade. Exceptional participation can improve your grade.

It takes 300 people about 8 months at a cost of 1.5 million dollars to make one episode of *The Simpsons*



Schedule

Date	Readings and Homework Due	Class Session Focus
Weds. 1-11	Welcome back	Course Overview and a bit on popular culture
Fri. 1-13	“Introduction”	Why is that popular?
Martin Luther King, Jr. Day—No Class		
Weds. 1-18	Total Request Live and the Creation of Virtual Community (on reserve)	Merchants of Cool video
1-20	“Writing about Popular Culture”	Finish video discuss it along with TRL reading and basic question of “how do we write well about popular culture?”
Mon. 1-23	Be sure to review the table of contents and identify your top three areas of interest out of the nine the book offers	Building blocks of culture We will pick groups—don’t be absent!
1-25	Review syllabus and table of contents—get a good “big picture” sense of the course	Media and culture
1-27	Bring in at least one print ad. If you bring in a magazine, have the ad(s) you picked book marked.	Critical Tool: Close Read and the art of looking
Mon. 1-30	Work with your group to determine your readings	Critical Tool: Semiotics Reading list due
2-1	Come in with questions, ideas, etc.	Group workshop day Q/A on all assignments, etc.
2-3	Be sure you’ve communicated with your group about how next week will work. Come in with questions	Archetypes as critical tool Application Activity Quiz Q/A on next week
Consuming Passions		
Mon. 2-6	Watch Super Bowl Ads	Video: Affluenza
2-8	Readings: “Addictive Virus” “Haunted Superstore” “Blue Jeans” “The Semiotics of Home Décor” Homework: 1) bring in “favorite” item from your apartment/dorm room or item from any formal “collection” you have.	Peer-lead presentation—be prepared to participate!
2-10		Quiz on readings and presentation Visual rhetoric and Dialectics as critical tool
Brought to you B(u)y		
Mon. 2-13	Readings: “Masters of Desire” “Sex, Lies, and Advertising” “What We Are to Advertisers”	Peer-lead presentation—be prepared to participate!

	<p>“Hype” Homework: Bring in advertisements that you feel illustrate themes from readings.</p>	
2-15	If anybody has or wants to buy any Country Living magazines, bring them in.	Critical tool: Fantasy Theme
2-17		Quiz Application Activity or No Logo Video
Video Dreams		
Mon. 2-20	<p>Readings “Signs of Intelligent Life” “You Can’t Say That” “Resisting the False Security of TV” “The Boob Tube” Homework: Write down your top 2 favorite TV shows ask older family member such as uncle, parent, grandparent what their 2 favorite shows are and why.</p>	Peer-lead presentation—be prepared to participate!
2-22		Critical Tool: Dramatism
2-24		Video: Cartoons Go to War Quiz
The Hollywood Sign		
Mon. 2-27	<p>Readings Due “The Western” “So You Wanna Be a Gangsta?” “Class and Virtue” “Postmorbidity Condition” Homework: Write a one paragraph summary when a film “changed” your attitudes, beliefs or behaviors in some meaningful way.</p>	Peer-lead presentation—be prepared to participate!
3-1		Critical Tool: Genre
3-3	How have Irish been portrayed in film? How has St. Patrick’s Day been defined in such a way as to express popular cultural values?	Quiz St. Patrick’s Day Discussion Masterplots and Genres Activity
 <p style="text-align: center;">Spring Break: Pedro Says “Come back rested, not arrested!”</p> 		

“ULTIMATELY^{MA} I HAVE ARGUED THAT POPULAR CULTURE IS WHAT WE MAKE FROM THE COMMODITIES AND COMMODIFIED PRACTICES MADE AVAILABLE BY THE CULTURE INDUSTRIES” John Storey: Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction (3rd ed.).

Popular Spaces		
Mon. 3-13	Bring in a sheet of paper that has 1) topic statement for your paper 2) at least five high quality sources 3) at least one question you have for me at this time	Case Study: Trading Spaces FYI: Career Fair is Weds. Use the Motivated Sequence and get a job!
3-15	Readings “NY Most Disliked Building?” “Alternating Currents” “Brand Identity at NikeTown” “The Science of Shopping” Homework: Write down 2 features of the UNCW campus you think are highly rhetorical in that they shape perceptions and behaviors on campus	Peer-lead presentation—be prepared to participate!
3-17		Quiz Discuss Mall/Mayfaire field trip Trading Spaces case study
Mon. 3-20	Be a proactive group member	Mall/Mayfaire Field Trip
3-22	Be a proactive group member	Field Trip write up—Final copy in my box by 4 pm
3-24	Work on final paper	COM Studies Day: get to a panel or two!
We’ve Come a Long Way, Maybe		
Mon. 3-27	Readings Males read: “Beauty Myth” and “No Unmarked Woman” Females read: “Gender Blur” and “Boys R Us” Homework: Write down 1) most surprising insight from article, & 2) most common stereotype of opposite sex promoted in popular culture.	Peer-lead presentation—be prepared to participate!
3-29		Video: Tough Guise
3-31		Critical Tool: Narrative Quiz
Daylight Savings begins on Sunday. Remember: “Spring Forward, Fall Back” so move that clock up 1 hour		
Constructing Race		
Mon. 4-3	Readings “In Living Color” “Funky White Boys” “Goin’ Gangsta, Choosin’ Cholita” “The Haves and the Have Nots” Homework: What is the healthiest and least healthiest pop culture artifact (movie, TV, clothing line, etc.) related to race in the U.S.	Peer-lead presentation—be prepared to participate!
4-5		Critical Tool: Ideological Analysis
4-7		Video: bell hooks Quiz

Mon. 4-10	Prepare draft of term project for peer critique session	Peer critique session
4-12	Draft of term paper due	
Easter Break		
It's Not Just a Game		
Mon. 4-17	Readings: "The Contradictions in Big-Time College Sports" "Power at Play" "I Won, I'm Sorry" "Never Trust a Snake" Homework: Write up a 1 paragraph summary of your perception of either this year's Super Bowl or NCAA Tournament with at least one connection to the readings	Peer-lead presentation—be prepared to participate!
4-19		Case Study: NBA Draft
4-21	Read the following article The Frost Heaves	Quiz Application Activity: Discuss reading and create a sport team logo.
American Icons		
Mon. 4-24	Readings: "Be Like Mike" "Batman, Deviance and Camp" "Barbie, G.I. Joe and Play in the 60s" "Larger than Life" Homework: Write down four artifacts (people, objects, etc.) that you feel have risen to icon status—the less obvious the better (no Elvis, etc.).	Peer-lead presentation—be prepared to participate!
4-26		SPOTS Video: Mickey Mouse Monopoly Quiz
4-28	Prepare media for presentation	Rehearse with Media Q and A on papers
Mon. 5-1	Finish up those final presentations	Final Presentations
Mon. 5-8	Finish up those final presentations!	EXAM Day 9-11. Absence = two absences.

COM 290 Grade-o-matic

You, yes you can keep track of your grades with the unique kit below and a ordinary calculator. Just divide the points you earn on any given assignment by the points possible on that assignment and you will have your percentage that corresponds to the grading chart discussed earlier.

Assignment	Point YOU earn / Points available
10 Quizzes @ 10 points each	1) ___/10 2) ___/10 3) ___/10 4) ___/10 5) ___/10 6) ___/10 7) ___/10 8) ___/10 9) ___/10 10) ___/10
Field Paper	___/20
Planning Paper for Class Sessions	___/50
Leading Class Sessions	___/50 (40 shared, 10 individual)
Peer Evaluations	___/25 (please make educated guess here unless grade looks critical)
Draft of Final Paper	___/25
Presentation of Paper	___/25
Final Paper	___/100
Class Participation	This will be used to help determine +/- situations

“In discussing the many things that rhetorical critics think about, we have covered quite a lot of concepts and terms. Does the critic have to use every term and concept . . . [when] doing criticism? Certainly not. Remember, we have been explaining choices that are available to the critic. What should guide those choices? The critic should ask those questions that help to reveal the meaning that he or she finds most interesting and important.”

Barry Brummett, Rhetoric in Popular Culture, p. 103