

“Dear Senator \_\_\_\_\_,  
 “I’m writing to dissuade you from your announced position on House Bill 1109b. Here is why you should beat a hasty retreat... There has been a lot of very poorly-sourced reporting on the economic consequences. In the March 25 p.6 article in the Albany Times-Union (“Experts Predict End of Life as We Know it”), every source speaking against this legislation had a financial stake in the outcome. Mr. Tao owns a controlling interest in... What direct evidence is provided? None. Instead, the reporter only spoke to one neighbor of... The cascade of unverified Facebook postings created heat, but no light...  
 The study referred to by your colleague Senator Jackson was financed by the same group that... Finally, I hope you have the time to pause and consider how cognitive dissonance may be at the heart of your reaction to facts that contradict your long-standing support for...”

Examples of winning essays are available at [http://www.centerfornewsliteracy.org/?category\\_name=scholarship-winner](http://www.centerfornewsliteracy.org/?category_name=scholarship-winner)

**Fall 2010 Winner**  
**Aleksandar Gilbert-Petrovich**



“...he explains the complex and confusing issue of net neutrality and the important debate about it clearly and engagingly. No small feat.” - Scholarship Committee



Scholarship funded by the New York Community Bank Foundation

Your final assignment will be a 1,200-to-1,500-word letter, written after a month-long pursuit of reliable information in the news. It is due at recitation May 4 or 5.

After selecting one of the questions provided below, you will research your argument using multiple news reports from at least five news outlets (i.e. CNN, Associated Press, FOX News, Wall Street Journal, NPR, High Times Magazine, CBS, etc). The point of News Literacy is to learn how to find reliable information in the news about current events AND to spot unreliable reports. Each news report you cite should be examined using the tools and principles you have learned this semester. Some you will praise, some you will tear apart. Do not cite your news reports formally in footnotes. Rather, work your references to them into your letter in a manner similar to the example on the left side of this page. You are welcome to play the Devil’s advocate or role-play a position you do not personally support, but the resulting letter must be well-researched, logically argued (as opposed to emotionally manipulative) and provide your elected representative with reliable information with which to reach a conclusion, make a judgment or take an action.

P.S. Every “A” paper is submitted to an independent panel of judges who award the News Literacy scholarship: Free in-state tuition for a semester.

CHOOSE ONE:



**MEDICAL MARIJUANA:** Look up the name of the Senator who represents your hometown in the New York State Senate (or who represents Stony Brook, if you’re not a NY native). Write her or him a letter urging a yes or no vote on Senate Bill 2774, which proposes to legalize medical use of marijuana in New York State.



**SUNY TUITION:** New York Governor Andrew Cuomo kicked off state budget negotiations stating that he would not support a tuition increase at SUNY campuses. By late March, he seemed to be supporting a gradual increase. Writing to him as a student, make the argument for one of those positions OR dive into the question of who should set SUNY tuition: The Legislature or each individual campus.



**HEALTHCARE REFORM:** Passed in 2010, the “Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act ” aimed to curtail healthcare costs and ensure coverage for millions of uninsured Americans. After re-taking control of the U.S. House in the mid-term election, Republicans (and three Democrats) in the U.S. House voted 245-189 for a bill called the “Repealing the Job-Killing Health Care Law Act.” Decide if you think the 2010 Healthcare Reform bill will hurt or help the U.S. economy. Then, write to one of New York’s two U.S. Senators, (or one of your home-state Senators if you’re from another state) to convince them to vote for repeal, partial repeal, or against repeal.



**NUCLEAR SAFETY:** You’ll need to decide if you think the recent news from Japan demonstrates the risks of nuclear power or the ability of nuclear power plants to survive extreme conditions. As President, Barack Obama has proposed to add \$36 billion in loan guarantees for nuclear plant construction to speed construction at a time when Wall Street is skittish about investing in nuclear. Should he continue this policy, abandon it or alter it?

## Essay Advice For News Literacy students

*“There is no such thing as good writing...only good rewriting.” –Mark Twain*

### How to write the winning essay

The grading rubric will be posted on Blackboard to help you as you refine and revise your writing, but here are some tips to get you started.

First, don’t blow unnecessary points by writing to the wrong person. Figure out who is the Senator from where, and so forth...

You will be expected to not only make your argument, but to describe how and why you reached that conclusion, what news sources and specific articles/videos you turned to, what information you rejected, as well as what information you identified as reliable and “actionable.”

To succeed, you must take notes as you research your question, noting the good reliable information you find AND the junk information you discard. Cramming your letter with a dull list of every News Literacy concept won’t win you the A. The point is to make a solid argument that, along the way, demonstrates how news literacy skills and concepts helped you support it.

If you’re not a confident writer, we encourage you to read chapters 3 & 6 of “Thoughtful Writing” by Prof. Gene Hammond, who is Director of Stony Brook’s Writing Center. The Writing Center also offers consultations, which we strongly encourage you to take advantage of.

To help you get started, here are some rules of thumb for a strong essay:

- ✓ **Beginnings and endings** are the natural points of emphasis of sentences, paragraphs and of essays. Make them count.
- ✓ **State** your conclusion or opinion boldly and clearly in the first sentence.
- ✓ **Organize** your essay so that your well-chosen examples support logical arguments made in clear, simple sentences.
- ✓ **Focus** on the most relevant News Literacy concepts. If you try to parrot every point in the News Literacy syllabus, or summarize every story in the selection, your essay will be tedious and unpersuasive.
- ✓ **Conversational** writing is the most readable, even when you are trying to educate your reader.
- ✓ **Emphasize** active verbs. Adjectives, adverbs, clichés and jargon are the weaknesses with which your reader will grow weary.
- ✓ **Conclude** with a specific recommendation. Now that you’ve studied the matter, what can you conclude? What decision can you make? Can you take action?
- ✓ **Proof-read** your final draft to prevent penalties for spelling, grammar and usage sins. Four revisions after your first draft should be enough, especially if you read each one aloud to yourself with a red pen in hand. (Better yet, have a friend read it. Mark the places where they hesitate or stumble. It’s a good way to identify clunky writing.)

*“Don’ forget... youse could win da scholarship!”*



