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The National Public Radio Journal in the Freshman Composition Classroom—
Teaching, Learning, Strategizing

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Introduction

Created in 1970 as a privately and publicly funded non-profit membership media organization that serves as a national syndicator to over 800 public radio stations in the United States, National Public Radio produces and distributes news and cultural programming throughout its affiliate stations. The station was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson following the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act in 1967.

Assignment Description

The National Public Radio Journal (NPRj) assignment is a four-week, eight-entry, (12-point) typed assignment designed for freshmen students who have successfully completed the first of a required, two-part Freshman Communicative Skills course sequence. Guidelines for the assignment are distributed by week three (of a fall or spring semester). The assignment is not given during summer sessions because the period of instruction is shortened to six weeks. In accordance with students’ individual schedule of classes, students must select various times throughout the course of the local station’s twenty-four hour news cycle, listen to various programs and newscasts, and write entries in the journal according to specifications and guidelines outlined for the assignment.

The journal is comprised of two main components: (1) written summaries of student-selected programs and (2) the student’s opinion of each selected program. Writers must follow a mandated format outlined by the instructor in order to successfully complete the journal. The formatted presentation of each journal page, called an "entry," consists primarily of the following information, placed in the upper left corner of each entry sheet: (a) name of selected program, (b) date of program, (c) clock time (program listened to), (d) program commentator, and (e) program topic. Two secondary components, which serve as the journal's culminating entries, complete the document. These final entries are: (1) the Most Significant Program and/or Commentator and (2) the Writer’s Response.
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Objectives

Students entering the academy from the safe cocoon of secondary schools across the nation are often confronted with a myriad of social, emotional, and academic choices for which they are sometimes ill-equipped. Without the safety net of parents and mentors to help guide them in the right direction, freshmen students can often be lead academically astray. They can be gleefully or reluctantly caught up in the euphoria of non-existent curfews and social excess, which can often have detrimental effects upon their already fragile attempts to remain scholastically focused. In this regard, assignment of the NPRj in the freshman composition class serves several objectives:

1. It empowers students to make subject-defined choices of their own.
2. It serves as a time management tool to help students adjust to the demands of the collegiate level.
3. It provides opportunities for verbal exchanges of substance on a number of social, political, and academic topics of interests.
4. It permits students to collaborate on individual student topics and issues.
5. It exposes students to opposing viewpoints on a range of topics.
6. It serves as a diverse writing assignment outside of those general or mandated in the freshman writing classroom.
7. It presents a balanced discussion of topics and issues outside the community of collegiate conversation among students' peers.
8. It grants the writer the ability to self-express on a range of issues without concern for political, social, and academic "correctness."
9. It can serve as a resource for advanced research in courses beyond the freshman composition level.
10. It gives students the ability to chart a component of the course's writing requirements according to their individual communicative skills and abilities.
11. It teaches students to adhere to oral and written directions.
12. It assists students in note-taking skills needed for more advanced scholarly endeavors.
13. It helps students in auditory engagements.
14. It exposes students to cultural information beyond their immediate surroundings.
15. It teaches students to adhere to specific guidelines in completing a task from beginning to end.
Components

The NPRj consists of two primary components: (1) a one-paragraph, double-spaced summary of the student's selected program and (2) a one-paragraph, double-spaced opinion of the selected program. Each component is contained on a single sheet, separated by the program's identifying information (outlined in the description). The NPRj's secondary component consists of: (1) Most Significant Commentator, where the student writer must provide feedback on the commentator whose program(s) and/or broadcast(s) provided the most distinct and beneficiary information during the period of the assignment, and the Writer's Response component.

The Writer's Response allows the student to address the mandate of the requirement by writing honestly and openly about the overall assignment without fear of academic retribution. Comments presented in the Writer's Response allow students to offer strategies for improvement of the journal for future assignments and permit students to offer opinions on the benefits, advantages, and/or disadvantages of keeping an unorthodox journal in the freshman composition classroom. Students are encouraged to write at length. Commentary provided in the Writer's Response can be constructed in paragraph format or as a numerical listing. The Most Significant Commentator and Writer's Response components follow the journal's eight entries and conclude the document.

Specifications

The NPRj must be prepared according to the following guidelines and specifications:

1. The document must follow a specific order:
   a. Table of Contents (see guidelines, #2, below).
   b. Journal entries (eight).
   c. Most Significant Commentator/Program.
   d. Writer's Response.

2. The table of contents page must include the listing of an abbreviated topic of reference for each entry, the program's title, commentator's name, and page number of the entry. Each journal entry must be in accordance with the earliest NPR program to the latest NPR program (by date).

3. Individual page entries (Summary and Opinion) must be double-spaced. Each program's identifying information (presented in the upper left corner of each entry's page) must be single-spaced.

4. Journal entries must be contained within the period of assessment (between week three and week seven) of the semester.

5. No more than two entries per day can be submitted in the journal.*

6. No more than two entries per week can be submitted in the journal.*

7. Each journal must contain eight different programs.**

8. Each journal must contain eight different commentators.**
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9. Each journal is an independent project.

* The guidelines prevent students from writing the total number of required journal entries in a single day and/or week.

** The guidelines prevent students from listening to the same NPR programs and commentators throughout the assignment.

Assessment/General

While the NPRj is a major assignment, its assessment does not conform to a standard rubric for grading student compositions, essays, and related academic work in the classroom. The journal is assessed according to the following:

1. Clarity of writing provided in each of the following components: Summary, Opinion, Most Significant Commentator, and Writer’s Response.

2. Thoroughness of information provided in components.

3. Adherence to specifications outlined for the journal.

4. Contribution to discussions and class participation in weekly NPRj discussions.

5. Completion of a short (typed) paper, approximately 250 words (similar to the Writer’s Response component) entitled: "NPR: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly." The paper is submitted approximately two weeks following submittal of the journal (prior to the return of the journals).

Assessment/Specific

A. NPRj letter grade: A/B/C/D
B. Submitted paper: S/U
C. Assessment if NPRj assignment not completed by student: F

NOTE: Students are allowed to retain journals following assessment.

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