

**Social Scientific Approaches to Communication Research  
COM 382**

Winter 2011

Monday and Wednesday, 9:30 – 11:20

Room #120 Communications Building

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**Course Content**

There are many ways to learn about social science research methods in communication. One way is to talk broadly about the different qualitative, comparative, and quantitative approaches. Another is to discuss the tools that usually go into the methodological toolkit for social science research, and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each. Still another is to actually do a research project, going from the conceptualization of research questions to the execution of a research plan and the dissemination of results. In this course, we will do the first and third of these ways of learning about social science research methods in communication.

Almost all research involves teamwork, and all research requires some forms of collaboration and a deliberate dissemination strategy for the findings of research. Teamwork is difficult but very few employment opportunities outside the university involve individuals writing essays for grades. Almost every project in the working world is a team project. The learning goals of this class are to

- have students understand the major epistemological differences between qualitative, comparative, and quantitative research methods
- develop team research skills by providing opportunities for leadership, collaboration, and peer review in research
- involve students in original research, conceptualized as a concrete project with distinct timelines, deliverables, and public impact.

By the end of the class, students will be able to

- design a small research project
- collect data, assess its quality, and manage it
- manage real working relationships under tight deadlines.

In weeks one, two, and three, we will explore the general features of research methods, usually by speaking more of epistemologies than of particular research tools. Subsequently, we will dedicate all the time that usually goes into preparing for class, attending lectures, and doing lab activities to a single study. The specifics of work tasks and deadlines will evolve over the remaining weeks of quarter, and are to be determined by the talent pool in the class, the research questions we craft, and the opportunities and obstacles that present themselves as we design and enact a research plan.

This class will be a unique experience in several ways. On average, a 300-level class involves 10 hours a week of both in-class time and class preparation. Even though there are no tests or deadlines in this syllabus, students will still be expected to work the full 10 hours on our project. There are no required readings or traditional exercises, but it is very likely that you will be making phone calls, doing various kinds of interviews, and making creative use of media for research purposes. Class time will provide 4 hours a week for meetings with your group, editing each other's work, and conferring with the instructor. This is a service education class where the goal is to learn about how social science is done in real-time.

### **Methods of Evaluation**

There are no quizzes, mid-term exams or final exams in this course. Student work in this class will be evaluated through the following components.

Peer Review Participation - Will be evaluated on the basis of contributions to group work involved in deliverables 1, 2 and 3, as assessed by your peers in the group. 50 points.

Instructor Participation - Will be evaluated on the basis of contributions to group work. 30 points.

Subject Recruitment – Bring 10 people into the research sample. 20 points.

Deliverable 1 - Research Memo: A research memo is defined as a 1,000 word essay, carefully proofread and with detailed citations, submitted with all authors credited and on time. 100 points.

Deliverable 2 - Team Task: A team task is defined as a set of deliverables and deadlines assigned to a small group. 100 points.

Deliverable 3 - An additional Research Memo or Team Task. 100 points.

In total, 400 points can be earned, and the number of points earned will be directly translated to a grade point average.

The peer evaluations will be run every two weeks, and each person will evaluate the people they have been working with. Students will be responsible for generating content ideas during our meetings, for collecting and analyzing data, for constructing the web site, for publicizing our research findings, and for representing our project to the public. Some stories may be dropped for lack of data or writing quality, but you will still be credited for trying. E-mail will be used to conduct class business and carry on debates outside of class time. E-mail will often be used to distribute the data gathering exercises.

Since irregular attendance will disrupt our learning community and a portion of the grade comes from peer review, absences will affect your grade. Attendance will be monitored, and since demand is high for admission to this class, absences may also result in your spot being given to another student. Exceptions will only be made for medical reasons, and you will need a doctor's note.

A team grade on a task or deliverable becomes an individual's grade. The tasks and deliverables will be defined and timed in negotiation with the instructor and teaching assistant, and specific tasks and deliverables must be timed and graded so that the overall class project can be completed by week 10. For example, a team of 8 people might be tasked with doing a telephone survey of 100 subjects on two nights in February. They might agree that their performance will be evaluated on the successful completion of 100 surveys. If they complete 94 surveys, and 4 surveys are invalidated for coding mistakes, the team would have successfully completed 90 surveys and each individual in the team could earn 90 points. Later on, through the peer review participation score, team members would also be able to award each other additional points for hard work and leadership.

Several of the data memos will generate public buzz beyond our classroom. If your writing style impedes our ability to understand your arguments or embarrasses the University of Washington your grade will suffer, so it is a good idea to have your colleagues proofread your writing. Use William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style* (New York: Macmillan, 1979) for writing style questions. The University of Washington has a number of resources to help with writing style, and they are described online at <http://depts.washington.edu/uwrite/>. Howard Becker's *Writing for Social Sciences* also has advice on developing good writing habits. Citations should be formatted according to the *Chicago Manual of Style*. Please refer to the University of Washington's "Principles Regarding Academic Integrity" for the definitions and

consequences of plagiarism. The results of the research will go live on the website by week 9, and it is likely that a press release will be issued in week 10.

### **Lab Fees**

There are no required textbooks, required readings, or course packs for this class. A \$20 lab fee will be collected for any necessary software, website hosting services, the survey inducement, refreshments for the telephone survey team, and any other expenses directly related to the project and conduct of this research. The teaching assistant will collect \$20 in support of your research projects in the first two weeks of class.