

**COMM 650**  
**COMMUNICATION RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES**  
**Fall 2013**

Instructor: Kevin Wright, PhD  
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Meeting Time: Tuesdays, 7:20 p.m.  
Classroom: West 1007  
Office Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays,  
4:30-6:00 p.m. (or by appointment)

Instructor: Emily Vraga, PhD  
Office: Robinson A, 329A  
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Meeting Time: Tuesdays, 7:20 p.m.  
Classroom: West 1004  
Office Hours: Mondays and Tuesdays,  
2:00-3:00 p.m. (or by appointment)

*Course Description and Objectives*

This course is aimed at providing a general understanding of the social scientific approach to communication research. The two primary goals will be to: (a) give you the basic tools you need to do your own research, and (b) enhance your ability to read and effectively evaluate published communication research. The course will help you to understand many of the basic ways that people studying communication investigate the social world. We will go through the research process, from the development of research questions and hypotheses, through gathering and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data, to drawing conclusions about research questions and hypotheses.

The emphasis in this course will be on the methods and analytical strategies that graduate students will be most likely to use in their independent research. The course will include a limited introduction to statistical analysis, including an introduction to SPSS, and various qualitative data collection and analysis procedures.

*Textbook*

Frey, L. R., Botan, C. H., & Kreps, G. L. (2000). *Investigating communication: An introduction to research methods* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

*Required Software*

Survey Monkey Silver membership (1 month). You are welcome to join as a group – please make sure to turn off your account when you are done downloading your data! <http://www.surveymonkey.com/>

*Supplemental Readings*

Readings from outside the required textbook will be made available on Blackboard at least one week prior to the due date for that reading. Students are responsible for

understanding the materials from each week's readings *before* coming to class. The quizzes will include questions based off of the reading material. Please see the Blackboard site for all additional readings.

### *Course Structure*

This course is broken down into four separate modules. Module 1 (Weeks 1-2) and Module 4 (Weeks 14-15) are a joint session, comprising both sections of the class. Module 1 serves as an introduction to the course, while Module 4 offers a conclusion, highlighting group efforts throughout the course. Professor Wright and Professor Vraga will jointly teach these modules.

Module 2 and Module 3 are broken into two separate sections: a module that focuses on quantitative methods, taught by Professor Vraga, and a module focusing on qualitative methods, taught by Professor Wright. Students enrolled in COMM650 – 001 (Vraga) are assigned to Group A in this course, meaning Module 2 will focus on quantitative methods and Module 3 will focus on qualitative methods. Students enrolled in COMM650 – 002 (Wright) are assigned to Group B, meaning Module 2 will focus on qualitative methods and Module 3 will focus on quantitative methods. Therefore, all students will engage with the same basic course material, although some adjustments will be made depending on whether students learn about qualitative vs. quantitative methods first. Professor Wright will grade all material dealing with qualitative methods, while Professor Vraga will grade all material dealing with quantitative methods. Both Professor Vraga and Professor Wright will review final presentations and final papers to determine these grades.

### *Course Requirements*

- (1) *Quizzes* – You will have 5 multiple-choice quizzes throughout the semester (please see the syllabus for each week). These quizzes will occur during the first 20 minutes of an assigned class period and will include questions on both (1) the readings assigned for the upcoming week and (2) previous weeks' lecture notes and readings. No make-up will be offered for these quizzes except in cases of excused absences, as determined by the professor. **(30 points each)**
- (2) *Midterms* – You will have two take-home exams during the course, which will include open-ended questions to test your understanding of the relationships among class concepts. You will have two weeks to complete these exams. You are not allowed to work together in completing the exams. **(100 points each)**
- (3) *Assignments* – All assignments are due at the time noted on the schedule for that assignment. Instructions for each assignment will be provided and discussed in class in advance.
  - a. *Group Purpose Statement*. At the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of class meeting, each research team should submit a 1-2 page paper that summarizes the purpose of their proposed research study for the semester. In this statement, each team should provide a brief overview of their overall research topic, a rationale

for the study, and some tentative research questions/hypotheses. (20 points)

- b. *GMU human subjects training.* You are welcome to work with your group to complete these trainings, which usually take around 1 hour. Please find instructions for the GMU human subjects training here: <http://research.gmu.edu/ORIA/docs/IRB%20Training20060817.pdf> (20 points)
  - c. *Quantitative survey questionnaire proposal.* Before submitting to IRB or collecting data, all groups should turn in their proposed questionnaire for their survey to me. This questionnaire should usually range from about 8-12 batteries (or sets) of questions, and should follow the guidelines discussed in class, including consideration of question order and avoiding common pitfalls in question wording. At least one of these questions must be multi-dimensional (e.g., must include multiple ways of measuring the same concept). (20 points)
  - d. *IRB submission #1.* This IRB submission will be your initial group submission to collect data for the course. It will be due the Friday after your second week of Module #2 (Week #4 of the course). You may not submit to IRB until all group members have completed the human subjects training. To complete your IRB submission, please see <http://oria.gmu.edu/irbnet/>. You will be asked to set up an account through IRBnet, which will walk you through the submission process. **Please note:** Setting up your account at IRBnet can take up to 48 hours. Please make sure to set up your account well before the due-date for the assignment. All groups are required to complete the IRB submission before they will be allowed to begin collecting data. (20 points)
  - e. *IRB submission #2.* This second IRB submission will allow you to build on to your existing IRB protocol by submitting an amendment to collect additional data (either qualitative or quantitative, depending on which module you completed first). This submission will again be filled out as a group. (10 points)
  - f. *Qualitative data transcription.* After completing your qualitative data collection, your group will be required to provide a transcription of the event. More details will be provided in class about the requirements for this assignment, which depend on the data collection technique used (20 points)
- (4) *Lab exercises* – for each lab session there will be a take-home exercise, which you will have one week to complete. You are allowed to work in groups for the analytical portion of these assignments, but each individual is required to do their own interpretation of the results and should turn in their own completed lab exercise. (20 points each)

- (5) *Presentation of research findings* – During the final two weeks of the course, each group will be required to give a 15-minute presentation on their group’s research project for the semester. This presentation should include an overview of the theoretical foundation for your study, a description of the methodology and findings for both the qualitative and quantitative data collection, and a general discussion of the meaning and implications of your findings, for both theory and practice. Each group member must be part of the presentation. After the presentation, your group will be required to answer questions from the class and the instructors about your project. This presentation is designed to give groups an opportunity to learn about classmates’ research, as well as to provide feedback for the group in writing their final paper. **(100 points)**
- (6) *Final research paper* – Each group is required to turn in a research paper describing their findings, due before the final exam period on December 10<sup>th</sup>. This paper should be ready for conference submission and prepared in accordance with the APA 6<sup>th</sup> edition requirements. It should include 5 basic sections:
- a. An introduction to the topic, including its importance for further study and your contributions to the field.
  - b. A literature review, describing previous research on the topic and building an argument for your specific study and expectations. This review will require you to do outside research on your topic area, and should rely heavily on published academic findings (e.g., journal articles, academic book chapters) in formulating and supporting your argument.
  - c. The quantitative methodology and findings, outlining your quantitative approach, variable measurement, and results.
  - d. The qualitative methodology and findings, outlining your qualitative approach and results.
  - e. A general discussion, highlighting your key findings across the qualitative and quantitative approaches and discussing their meaning for theory and practice.

While your paper should form a cohesive narrative, it will be assigned three separate grades. 100 points will be devoted to the quantitative section, 100 points will be devoted to the qualitative section, and 100 points will be assigned for the overall framework and the quality of your discussion and interpretations. **(300 points)**

- (7) *Class participation* – This is a graduate course, so you are expected to come to each class period ready to contribute to the class discussion. We will use a seminar format to encourage discussion, to the degree possible. Therefore, it is necessary that students are comfortable engaging with the course material and each other. Each person is expected to contribute to the course, and you will be “called on” to answer questions and integrate material. Your oral participation during class discussions is vital. It is **not** necessary that you talk very often (some students

feel that the amount of time they hold forth is directly correlated with their contribution to class discussion, but this is not so). It is more important that you listen closely to the discussion and ask questions or volunteer answers that are insightful, provide contrasts, draw on your experience, or assist in moving the discussion along toward a shared understanding. It is often helpful for students to prepare one or more questions or points for discussion while reading/completing assigned materials and to bring them to class. **As a matter of fact, we expect you to do this and will call on you to see what your question or other contribution is.** Be careful not to slip into a frame of mind in which you only listen to others in class. Active learners learn more than passive learners.

In addition, you will be working as a group throughout the class to perform original data collection and prepare a final research paper summarizing your results and interpretations. Contributing to this group process is essential for receiving a good participation grade in the course. Students will be asked to rate each group member's performance in the group, including their effort and contributions to the final project. These peer evaluations will be supplemented by the professors' assessments of effort. Students who are having difficulty with their group should contact the professor immediately to ensure a good participation grade. Students who are not contributing may not receive full credit for the final group effort. **(100 points)**

### *Group Final Project*

The majority of the class will focus on original data collection. During the first week of class, you will be given the opportunity to form groups of two or three students with similar interests (NOTE: All groups of students must be in the same module order – Either Group A or Group B).

Groups will together be responsible for all group assignments related to their final project, and may often work together on individual assignments (for example, lab assignments). Therefore, it is essential that each group member is contributing to the team. A large portion of the course grade is devoted to participation, which includes peer evaluations of group effort and involvement. If all the group members agree that a certain group member is not contributing equally to the group, that individual may not receive full credit on the group grade. While peer evaluations count heavily towards the participation grade, Professor Wright and Professor Vraga will make final decisions on all grades.

### *SPSS*

During the quantitative portions of the course, Professor Vraga will be providing information on how to use SPSS, a data analysis software. You will be required to have access to SPSS for course work throughout the class. SPSS is available at many of the computer labs on campus. If you do a lot of your work off campus, you may want to purchase a GradPack version of SPSS, which is available through [onthehub.com](http://onthehub.com) (and other online vendors). If you do decide to purchase, there are other versions. For this course, you will need the GradPack version. You are not required to purchase SPSS for

the course, but you must have access to it to be able to complete the lab assignments and to work on the quantitative portion of the final project. Be sure to consider which solution best fits your needs in advance of the first in-lab day.

### *Use of Blackboard*

We will use Blackboard for various components of the course, including accessing supplemental readings, turning in most assignments, and posting lecture notes and class handouts. If you have not used Blackboard before, it would be a good idea to get familiar with it **BEFORE** the second class. Blackboard can be accessed after you log in your myMason account (under the Courses tab). At the bottom of the page you will find training documents and videos that can help you learn how to use Blackboard.

### *Course Grades – Breakdown*

<b>Requirement</b>	<b>Total Points</b>
Quizzes (5)	150 points
Midterms (2)	200 points
Assignments & lab exercises	150 points
Final presentation	100 points
Final paper	300 points
Participation	100 points
<b>Total</b>	<b>1000 points</b>

### *Course Grades*

A	93-100 %	= 930-1000 Points
A-	90-92%	= 900-929 Points
B+	87-89%	= 870-899 Points
B	83-86%	= 830-869 Points
B-	80-82%	= 800-829 Points
C+	77-79%	=770-779 Points
C	70-79%	= 700-769 Points
F	LT 70%	<=699 Points

## Course Schedule: Group A (Quantitative methods first)

Week	Topic	Reading	Assignments
<b>Module 1: Communication Research Methods</b>			
Week 1 – 8/27	Introduction What is good communication research? Qualitative vs. quantitative approaches	FBK 1, 2	
Week 2 – 9/3	<b>Quiz #1</b> Designing ethical research Literature review: Building theory	FBK 3, 6	GMU Human Subjects Training
<b>Module 2: Quantitative Methods</b>			
Week 3 – 9/10	Measuring variables Reliability and validity	FBK 4, 5	Group purpose statement
Week 4 – 9/17	<b>Quiz #2</b> Survey research Sampling methodology	FBK 8	Survey questionnaire due (in Survey Monkey) IRB submission #1 due ( <b>Friday</b> )
Week 5 – 9/24	<b>Lab #1</b> SPSS basics Variable computation and descriptive analysis	FBK 11	
Week 6 – 10/1	<b>Quiz #3</b> Experimental research Hypothesis testing	FBK 7, 12 Bones, 2012	Lab #1 Assignment
Week 7 – 10/8	<b>Lab #2</b> Analyzing differences between groups Analyzing relationships among variables	FBK 13, 14	Data collection complete Cancel Survey Monkey
Week 8 – 10/15	<b>NO CLASS – COLUMBUS DAY</b>		Lab #2 Assignment
<b>Module 3: Qualitative Methods</b>			
Week 9 –	Introduction to qualitative	FBK 10	Midterm #1 due

10/22	methods	Denzin & Lincoln chapter	
Week 10 – 10/29	<b>Quiz #4</b> Interviewing procedures Focus group research	DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree article Kitzenger article 1 Kitzenger article 2	IRB submission #2 due ( <b>Friday</b> )
Week 11 – 11/5	Focus group research Ethnographic methods	Tates et al. article Critical incident technique article Herdt article TBA	
Week 12 – 11/12	<b>Quiz #5</b> Ethnographic methods/Issues in qualitative methods Qualitative data analysis	Reed & Payton article Wolf et al. article Annells article	
Week 13 – 11/19	Qualitative data analysis Qualitative research reports	Weitzman chapter Wright article TBA	Qualitative transcripts due
<b>Module 4: Research Presentations</b>			
Week 14 – 11/26	Presentations		
Week 15 – 12/3	Presentations		Midterm #2 due
FINAL EXAM 12/10	7:30-10:15 p.m.		Final paper due

## Course Schedule: Group B (Qualitative methods first)

Week	Topic	Reading	Assignments
<b>Module 1: Communication Research Methods</b>			
Week 1 – 8/27	Introduction What is good communication research? Qualitative vs. quantitative approaches	FBK 1, 2	
Week 2 – 9/3	<b>Quiz #1</b> Designing ethical research Literature review: Building theory	FBK 3, 6	GMU Human Subjects Training
<b>Module 2: Qualitative Methods</b>			
Week 3 – 9/10	Introduction to qualitative methods	FBK 10 Denzin & Lincoln chapter	Group purpose statement
Week 4 – 9/17	<b>Quiz #2</b> Interviewing procedures Focus group research	DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree article Kitzenger article 1 Kitzenger article 2	IRB submission #1 due ( <b>Friday</b> )
Week 5 – 9/24	Focus group research Ethnographic methods	Tates et al. article Critical incident technique article Herdt article TBA	
Week 6 – 10/1	<b>Quiz #3</b> Ethnographic methods/Issues in qualitative research Qualitative data Analysis	Reed & Payton article Wolf et al. article Annells article	
Week 7 – 10/8	Qualitative data analysis	Weitzman chapter	Qualitative transcripts due

	Qualitative research reports	Wright article TBA	
Week 8 – 10/15	<b>NO CLASS – COLUMBUS DAY</b>		
<b>Module 3: Quantitative Methods</b>			
Week 9 – 10/22	Measuring variables Reliability and validity	FBK 4, 5	Midterm #1 due
Week 10 – 10/29	<b>Quiz #4</b> Survey research Sampling methodology	FBK 8	Survey questionnaire due (in Survey Monkey)  IRB submission #2 due ( <b>Friday</b> )
Week 11 – 11/5	<b>Lab #1</b> SPSS basics Variable computation and descriptive analysis	FBK 11	
Week 12 – 11/12	<b>Quiz #5</b> Experimental research Hypothesis testing	FBK 7, 12 Bones (2012)	Lab #1 Assignment Data collection complete
Week 13 – 11/19	<b>Lab #2</b> Analyzing differences between groups Analyzing relationships among variables	FBK 13, 14	Cancel Survey Monkey
<b>Module 4: Research Presentations</b>			
Week 14 – 11/26	Presentations		Lab #2 Assignment due
Week 15 – 12/3	Presentations		Midterm #2 due
FINAL EXAM 12/10	7:30-10:15 p.m.		Final paper due

## **General Notes:**

### *Possible Changes to the Syllabus*

This course schedule is meant to provide you with a sense of the topics that will be covered in the class. Depending on time constraints and on feedback from the students, we may have to adjust the lecture topics, readings, and assignment due dates in the syllabus. You will receive advance notice of any changes to the course plan as soon as possible.

### *Classroom Atmosphere*

This class is designed to promote an engaging and informative environment. Part of that is respectful behavior on the part of all the members of the class. Please avoid engaging in any activities that are distracting or disrespectful to your peers or to the instructor. This includes arriving late to class, packing up early, texting or answering the phone during class, talking noisily with peers, or using your laptop for non-classroom related activities (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, etc.). If you are disrupting your peers, you may be asked to put away your computer or to leave the classroom.

As part of the class, you are encouraged to engage with your peers and with the professors. However, this should be done in a respectful and civil manner. Respect for each other's opinions and arguments are an integral part of this process. Anyone engaging others in a disrespectful tone (including name-calling, derogating their arguments, etc.) will be asked to leave the classroom, as well as lose points from their participation grade.

### *Class Attendance*

You are expected to attend all class periods for this course. If you are absent for any reason, you are responsible for the material covered and any announcements made while you were away. You will need to turn in any assignments due in that class period in advance of the due date to avoid losing points. In addition, you are expected to arrive on time for each class period. Walking into class late disrupts the classroom atmosphere and is disrespectful to your peers.

### *Quizzes and Attendance*

This course includes 5 quizzes, which will be administered during the first 15-20 minutes of the class period. Students arriving late will not be given extra time to complete the quiz, except in extenuating circumstances as decided by the professor. You may only make up a quiz if you have an excused absence (such as illness or death in the family), which must be cleared with the professor in advance of the class or as soon as possible. The professors make the final determination on excused absences and any make-up quizzes or assignments.

### *Late Assignments*

Assignments turned in late will be penalized by deducting 10% from the total points for each day it is late. Assignments will no longer be accepted after 3 days past the due date.

### *Take-Home Exams*

During the course, you will have two take-home exams for the qualitative and quantitative portions of the class. You are expected to work alone to complete these exams.

### *Email Use*

Email is the preferred method for contacting Professor Wright and Professor Vraga. When you email us, please make sure to identify yourself using your full name and the course number, when appropriate. Please allow at least 24 hours for a return email. You should plan accordingly when asking questions about assignments; we often will not be able to reply if you email us only a few hours before an assignment is due.

The professors only have access to your Mason email account. If you use another email account, it is your responsibility to check your MasonLIVE email account frequently to receive important University information, including messages related to this class. See <http://masonlive.gmu.edu> for more information.

**DO NOT** email the professors your assignments. All written assignments are expected to be submitted to Blackboard in advance of the due date. Some assignments may also be turned in as hard copies in class, but would still need to be uploaded to Blackboard, unless otherwise noted. If you miss the due date, go to the Communication Department main office and leave your assignment in my mailbox.

### *Academic Integrity*

Mason is an Honor Code university; please see the University Catalog for a full description of the code and the honor committee process. The principle of academic integrity is taken very seriously and violations are treated gravely. What does academic integrity mean in this course? Essentially this: when you are responsible for a task, you will perform that task. When you rely on someone else's work in an aspect of the performance of that task, you will give full credit in the proper, accepted form. Another aspect of academic integrity is the free play of ideas. Vigorous discussion and debate are encouraged in this course, with the expectation that all aspects of the class will be conducted with civility and respect for differing ideas, perspectives, and traditions. When in doubt, please ask for guidance and clarification.

### *Office of Disability Services*

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) at 993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through the ODS. <http://ods.gmu.edu>

*Other Useful Campus Resources:*

WRITING CENTER: A114 Robinson Hall; (703) 993-1200; <http://writingcenter.gmu.edu>

UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES "Ask a Librarian"  
<http://library.gmu.edu/mudge/IM/IMRef.html>

COUNSELING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES (CAPS): (703) 993-2380;  
<http://caps.gmu.edu>

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