

## Comm400: Communication Research Methods Spring 2014

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Classroom: Innovation Hall 208  
Course Time: 1:30 – 2:45 Tuesday/Thursday  
Office Hours: W 1:30-3:00 or by appointment

### Course Description:

Many of the decisions made in our society have their foundation in evidence obtained through scientific inquiry. In the communication field, this includes which brands to promote (and how to promote them effectively), which policies to support (and how to advocate for them), and how people make decisions about politics, consumption, and civic life. Therefore, understanding the method by which this evidence is produced is vitally important.

The purpose of this course is to help students obtain the basic knowledge and fundamental skills of communication research. This class is designed to accomplish three inter-related goals: (1) to introduce the basic process, concepts, logic, and techniques of communication research; (2) to provide a critical framework to examine communication problems and to evaluate claims about processes and effects; and (3) to gain insight into the research process through hands-on experience. Special attention is paid to the ethical considerations communication researchers face, issues of design and measurement validity, the impact of sampling decisions on data quality, performing data analysis to describe the data and understand relationships between concepts, and developing concise written and oral presentations of the findings.

This course draws from the philosophical tenet that one of the most effective ways to learn is by being actively engaged in the subject matter (“learning by doing”). Therefore, this course is built around a semester-long project, in which students will design their own research project: selecting an interesting question in the communication literature, proposing methods to test their expectations, gathering and analyzing data, and producing a final research presentation and report.

Upon finishing this course, students will be expected to understand the general logic and basic process of communication research and will be able to critically analyze research reports and conduct their own communication research studies.

### Required Text:

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:

SurveyMonkey.com. *Silver* membership for 1 month (don't forget to cancel your subscription!)

**Blackboard use:**

Visit MyMason page at <http://myMason.gmu.edu>. Log in using your Mason ID and password. After that, click on the "Courses" tab on the upper right corner of the page. COMM400 should show up on the course list. Please visit Blackboard on a regular basis. All handouts, additional readings, and grades will be posted there.

<b>Grade Distribution Overview</b>	<b>Points</b>
<i>Quizzes and Exams</i>	350
Quizzes (10)	200
Take-Home Exam	150
 <i>Individual Assignments</i>	 270
Pick a Theory	10
Literature Search	20
Annotated Bibliography	100
Individual IRB	20
Qualitative Interview	20
Analyzing Quantitative Data Assignment	50
Class Participation	50
 <i>Final Project Grades</i>	 380
Group Research Question	20
Group Questionnaire	20
Group Data Cleaning	20
Group Data Analysis Plan	20
Final Research Paper	250
Group Presentation	50
 <b>Total Points in Class</b>	 <b>1000</b>

**Grades:**

Your final letter grade will be assessed based on the weighted total points you have accumulated through completing exams and assignments:

B+	87-89	A	93-100	A-	90-92
C+	77-79	B	83-86	B-	80-82
D	60-69	C	70-76		
		F	59 or less		

## Grade Breakdown:

### *Individual Grades*

1) *Quizzes (200 pts. total)*

Every Tuesday, the first 15 minutes of class is devoted to a short quiz. The quiz will mostly focus on the materials covered in class during the previous week, although there will be some questions coming from the assigned readings for that week. There are 11 quizzes total in the course; students will be allowed to drop their lowest quiz score at the end of the semester.

2) *Take-Home Exam (150 pts.)*

In week 10 of the semester, students will be assigned a take-home exam. This exam will ask students to reflect on and integrate their knowledge about different types of research methods, their strengths and weaknesses, and their ethical constraints. Students will be allowed to use any course materials (lectures, textbook, notes, etc.) in completing this exam. Each student is required to complete the take-home exam independently from other students, with no collaboration.

3) *Pick a Theory (10 pts.)*

During the first week of class, you should briefly identify a communication theory or concept that is interesting to you. In 3-4 sentences, you should describe how you would like to apply that theory/concept during the course of the class. I will be assigning groups loosely based on shared interests (although I cannot guarantee your group will all share a similar vision!).

4) *Literature Search (20 pts.)*

Each group member must find at least 8 **academic** articles relevant to the group's topic, theory, or concepts. (**NOTE:** This excludes news outlets! Instead, you should find *peer-reviewed* scholarly articles). You will turn in a reference list in APA style of the 8 articles that you have selected.

5) *Annotated Bibliography (100 pts.)*

The annotated bibliography will include 4 research publications that are related to the communication topic you picked. Each group member must pick four discrete papers, which cannot overlap with other articles selected by your peers. Instructions on how to do an annotated bibliography will be provided later. Your goal in the annotated bibliography will be to (a) summarize the key findings of the article **in your own words**, (b) reflect on its strengths and weaknesses, and (c) describe how the article relates to your group's research project.

6) *IRB training (20 pts.)*

You are welcome to work with your group to complete these trainings, which usually take around 1 hour. However, each person must turn in their own completed IRB training form (which you will be able to download and print after completing the training). Please find instructions for the GMU human subjects training here: <http://research.gmu.edu/ORIA/docs/IRB%20Training20060817.pdf>

7) *Qualitative Interview (20 pts.)*

Based on your preliminary analysis of the quantitative survey data, you will perform one open-ended qualitative interview, which should last roughly 30 minutes. As a group, you will determine a set of open-ended questions that you wish to pursue further, and each individual is responsible for performing one interview or observation. You should take detailed notes for this experience, and you

will turn in a copy of those notes to me.

8) *Analyzing Quantitative Data Assignment (50 pts.)*

This homework assignment is designed to ensure students can appropriately interpret the quantitative data results discussed in class. This assignment should be completed **individually**.

9) *Class Participation (50 pts.)*

A large portion of your grade (over one third) is determined by your group's final project. To ensure each group member's participation, at the end of the semester groups will evaluate each of their peers for their contribution to the group, both in class and for the final paper. These evaluations will be kept confidential but will form a large basis of the final participation grade for the course.

To ensure that you do well, it is essential that you attend each and every class. This is not an easy course. The topics covered in this course are all interrelated and missing out on one topic will make it harder to understand subsequent topics. Further, as most of the class is devoted to a group project, failure to attend class consistently will be detrimental to your group members.

If you miss a class, you are responsible for finding out what went on in your absence and getting pertinent assignments, materials, notes, etc. You are required to have completed the assigned readings in advance of each class period and be prepared to answer questions and discuss the readings during the lecture period.

Basically, you ensure a good participation grade through engagement with the class and pulling your weight for the final project, which includes: finding and evaluating the relevant literature, participating in the qualitative and quantitative data collection, analyzing the data, writing up the final paper, and taking part in the final presentation. Your peers will be evaluating your performance in their group discussion and I will be taking my own notes that will supplement the peer evaluations in determining the final participation grade.

**NOTE:** If a group member receives low participation evaluations from all of their peers, they may be penalized on their final paper grade.

### **Group Grades**

10) *Group Research Question (20 pts.)*

As a group, you should narrow down your research focus to a single question or set of questions that you will be examining during the course. You should provide a brief explanation of why these questions are timely and interesting, as well as whether these questions are appropriate given your likely sample for your survey.

11) *Group Questionnaire (20 pts.)*

Your group will turn in a copy of your group's survey questions. You should aim to have about 12-15 questions on your survey, including some basic background information about the participants and the concepts or topics that you wish to analyze for your final paper. These questions should be driven by your group research question(s), and you should take care to avoid question biases.

12) *Group Data Cleaning (20 pts.)*

After completing the data collection, your group will be responsible for cleaning the data. You will submit a cleaned copy of the data and a copy of your questionnaire to me.

13) *Group Data Analysis Plan (20 pts.)*

For this course, students are not required to learn SPSS (a statistical software) to analyze their data. Instead, they will send me a copy of their cleaned data (see above), as well as a set of 3-5 analyses that they want performed. These analyses should describe the Independent and Dependent variables, the appropriate analytical technique, and why this analysis is helpful to answer their research question. I will then perform these analyses and return them to the groups for inclusion in their final paper.

14) *Final Research Paper (250 pts.)*

The majority of your group grade is determined by the final product: a 15-18 page (double-spaced, APA style) research paper. This paper should include an introduction describing why your study is important, a literature review providing support for your specific expectations, the methodological details and results for your quantitative data collection, a discussion of the meaning and implications of your findings, and a list of references used in the study. You should also include an appendix with your survey questionnaire. More details on the final research paper will be provided.

15) *Final Research Presentation (50 pts.)*

In addition to writing a final research paper, during the last week of class each group will be called upon to present their findings in a 10-minute powerpoint presentation. This presentation is designed to prepare students to share their findings with their peers in a concise manner. You should be prepared to answer questions that might arise on the basis of your presentation. This presentation gives your peers and your instructor the opportunity to provide feedback that can be used to improve the final paper.

## Course Schedule (Subject to Change)

Standard Font: Course topics and readings

*Italicized Font: Group assignments due*

**Bold Font: Individual assignments due**

Week	Date	Topics	Readings & Assignments
Week 1	1/21	Overview of course	
	1/23	Introduction: Why we need research	Textbook: Chapter 1
Week 2	1/28	Asking questions about communication I: Steps in Successful Research <i>Quiz #1</i>	Textbook: Chapter 2 <b>Pick a Theory Due</b>
	1/30	Asking questions about communication II: Qualitative vs. Quantitative Approaches	<i>Groups Assigned</i>
Week 3	2/4	Searching the communication literature <i>Quiz #2</i>	Textbook: Chapter 3
	2/6	Research ethics	Textbook: Chapter 6
Week 4	2/11	Observing and measuring communication: Defining Variables <i>Quiz #3</i>	Textbook: Chapter 4 <b>Literature Search Due</b>
	2/13	Observing and measuring communication: Levels of Measurement	
Week 5	2/18	Designing valid communication research I: Reliability and Validity <i>Quiz #4</i>	Textbook: Chapter 5 <i>Group Research Question Due</i>
	2/20	Designing valid communication research II: Sampling	

Week 6	2/25	Designing valid communication research III: Biases in Sampling <i>Quiz #5</i>	Textbook: Chapter 8
	2/27	Survey Research I: What is a Survey?	<b>Individual IRB Training Due</b>
Week 7	3/4	<b>In-class workshop: Group questionnaires</b>  <i>Quiz #6</i>	<b>Annotated Bib Due</b>  <i>Begin Survey Monkey account</i>
	3/6	Survey Research II: Types of Surveys and more biases	<i>Group Questionnaire due</i>
Week 8	3/11	SPRING BREAK!	
	3/13		
Week 9	3/18	Content and Textual Analysis  <i>Quiz #7</i>	Textbook: Chapter 9  <i>Begin quantitative data collection</i>
	3/20	Experimental Research Guest lecturer: Sonya Troller-Renfree	Textbook: Chapter 7
Week 10	3/25	Quantitative analysis I: Describing quantitative data	Textbook: Chapter 12  <i>End quantitative data collection</i>  <b>Hand out midterm</b>
	3/27	<b>In-class workshop: Descriptive analysis of quantitative data</b>  <i>Quiz #8</i>	<i>Group Data Cleaning due</i>  <i>End Survey Monkey account</i>
Week 11	4/1	Qualitative Methods	Neuman: Chapter 11
	4/3	Qualitative Analysis  <i>Quiz #9</i>	<b>Qualitative Interview due</b>
Week 12	4/8	Inferring from data: Estimation and significance testing	Textbook: Chapter 11  <b>Take-Home Midterm Due</b>

	4/10	Quantitative analysis II: Analyzing differences between groups  <i>Quiz #10</i>	Textbook: Chapter 13
Week 13	4/15	Quantitative analysis III: Analyzing relationships among variables	Textbook: Chapter 14
	4/17	Recap: Quantitative Analysis  <i>Quiz #11</i>	<b>Hand out data analysis assignment</b>
Week 14	4/22	<b>In-class workshop:</b> Group meetings for data analysis	<i>Group Data Analysis Plan due</i>
	4/24	<b>In-class workshop:</b> Group meetings for data analysis	<b>Quantitative Data Analysis Assignment due</b>
Week 15	4/29	<b>Group Presentations</b> (10 minutes per group)	<i>Group Presentation due</i> (slides submitted 4/28 by 9:00 p.m.)
	5/1	<b>Group Presentations</b> (10 minutes per group)	
EXAM WEEK			
	5/13	<b>FINAL PAPER DUE</b>  <b>1:30 p.m.</b>	



## 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, on feedback from the students, and on the availability of potential guest lecturers, I 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.

### Makeup Quizzes

Only in cases of excused absences will students be able to make up a quiz for the course. Students will be able to drop their lowest quiz grade at the end of the semester. No make-up opportunities will be allowed for unexcused absences or tardy arrival at class.

### Attendance and Participation

As noted earlier, 5% of your final grade will come from your participation in your group. While your peer evaluations of group effort make up the majority of this grade, you will also be evaluated for your participation in class. Frequent absences from class, consistent late arrivals, or long absences during the lecture will all count against your participation grade. You are expected to be present in the classroom for the entirety of the period and engaged in the classroom activities. As this is a tough class, your absences from class will make it harder for you to contribute to your group in a meaningful way.

If you miss a class, you are responsible for finding out what went on in your absence and getting pertinent assignments, materials, notes, etc. I am happy to answer any specific questions you have about lecture notes, the textbooks, or assignments, but I will not be reviewing the entire lecture.

You are expected and encouraged to participate in class discussions **actively**. Asking questions, making observations, or introducing issues for debate are all great ways to start. Your experiences with this course in a large part depend on your participation.

**Additional reminder:** If a person receives consistently low evaluations of effort from their group, and it coincides with my own evaluations of effort, you may not receive full credit for the group assignments or paper! It will not be possible to do well in this class without contributing to the group effort.

### 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.).

As part of the class, you are encouraged to engage with your peers and with me. However, this should be done in a respectful and civil manner. Respect for each other's opinions and arguments is 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.

### Readings

It is important to keep up with the readings in this course. The lectures are designed to supplement, not to replace, the readings. Readings are to be completed before the date listed in the Course Schedule. When completing the readings, you should aim to develop familiarity with the key issues or methodologies discussed and with the key terms. I have found taking notes of the key concepts, arguments, and terms in each chapter helps organize thoughts as well as provides a good review for the exams.

### In-Class Workshops

In-class workshops are provided for the convenience of the students to facilitate group work on the final project and provide me an opportunity to offer feedback on group progress. If these class periods are not used by the students for the purposes of their work, I will resume normal lecture activities on these days. Please come prepared to work on the assigned portion of the project on these in-class workshops.

Absences, tardiness, or early removal from these in-class workshops without prior permission from your instructor will be judged especially harshly. Please be on time and on task during these opportunities.

### Communication about Grades

If you have questions or concerns with a grade given in the course, you should contact me for more information.

If you have a question about how an assignment is graded, you are welcome to stop by office hours or make an appointment to talk with me during the next week. These questions may not be sent via email, nor will I answer questions about an assignment or exam immediately following the class period.

To appeal your grade, you must: (1) wait 24 hours to contact me (e.g., I will not be answering questions about grades immediately after an assignment or exam has been returned); (2) **email** me the specific reason you would like to question or appeal your grade; and (3) return the graded assignment (with my notes) to my mailbox. In this email, you should include an argument for why you believe your work should be reviewed. It is not sufficient to say "I think my paper is better than this grade indicates" – instead, you must point to specific examples that you think should be reviewed and provide evidence to support your claims.

To appeal your grade, must contact me **within one week** of receiving your grade. I will not review grades re-submitted after this time period has elapsed.

After I receive your email appealing your grade and the marked-up version of your assignment, I will review your assignment and provide a new grade.

### Late Assignments

Assignments turned in late will be penalized by deducting 5% from the total points for each day it is late. Assignments will no longer be accepted after 5 days past the due date.

### Early Read of Assignments

As a class policy, I do not read a student's assignment until he or she formally submits it for grading. I would be happy to address any specific concerns or questions regarding the assignment prior to the submission during office hours.

### Email Use

Email is a great way to stay in touch even after school hours. I encourage you to use email to communicate with me. However, when you email me, please make sure that you identify yourself clearly using both your **full name** and the **course number**. I will only answer **specific** questions about assignments, lectures, or papers via email. If you have more detailed questions about critical concepts or wish to discuss your paper or assignments, you should schedule an appointment to meet with me or come to my office hours. **Please be aware that I only have your GMU email address. All my emails will be sent to your GMU account. It is your responsibility to check your email on regular basis and make sure it is working!**

### Honor Code

George Mason University students are expected to adhere to the Honor Code; please familiarize yourself with the Honor Code if you have not already done so. All papers, projects, and exams are to be original and prepared for this class. Papers and projects for this class may be related to a task in another class, but you must get specific permission from both instructors. While hired typists and proofreaders are permitted, your exams, papers, and projects must be your own work.

### Student Notification of Grades

Grade reports are not automatically mailed to students at the end of the term. Instead, students may access their grades by calling 4GMU (703-993-4468) or by checking <http://webGMU.gmu.edu> for the grade report.

### Incompletes or Withdrawals

The situations in which an incomplete can be given are specified very clearly in the university catalogue, which indicates that such a grade may be given 'to a student who is passing a course but who may be unable to complete scheduled course work for a cause beyond reasonable control. Along the same lines, the policies regulating withdrawal are clearly specified in the catalogue, but they are granted ONLY for non-academic reasons.

### Reasonable Accommodation

Any student in this course who has a disability that may prevent him or her from fully demonstrating his or her abilities should contact the instructor or the course directors as soon as possible so that the necessary accommodations can be made to ensure full participation and facilitate the student's educational opportunities. A Disability Support Services office is available on campus to assist students

with special needs. If you have a disability or suspect you might have a disability, contact this office at 703-993-2474. If you have a disability that will require assistance, let your instructor know within the first two weeks of this course.

*The GMU Writing Center*

The Writing Center provides free tutorial sessions for all students needing help with any writing project from freshman essays to scholarly publications. It is best to make an appointment to ensure seeing a Writing Center consultant at a specific time; however, walk-ins will be accepted if there are openings. The GMU Writing Center is located at UWC: Robinson A114. Phone: 703-993-1200. Web page: [www.gmu.edu/departments/writingcenter](http://www.gmu.edu/departments/writingcenter)