



**Course Syllabus: Data for Communicators**  
**Lamar D. Fain College of Fine Arts**  
**MCOM 4223 Section 101**  
**Fall 2023 | MW 1-2:20 p.m.**

**Contact Information**

Instructor: Dr. Mitzi Lewis

Office: Fain Fine Arts Center D203

Student Office hours:

\*Tues. 3:30-5 p.m. | Wed. 2:30-5 p.m. | Thurs. 3:30-4:30 p.m.

*\*and by appointment—just ask and we will find a time*

*\*and "walk in"—I am in my office a lot!*

Office phone: (940) 397-4375

E-mail: [mitzi.lewis@msutexas.edu](mailto:mitzi.lewis@msutexas.edu)

NOTE: If you make the subject line look like this:

DATA FOR COMM: Subject of Message

it will be easier for me to see it and get back to you sooner. Please do not forget to include your name in the email so that I know who the email is from.

**Course Description**

Prerequisite: none

This course introduces you to the use of computers, databases, and the Internet to develop meaningful and complex stories. Emphasis is placed on finding raw data, organizing it, analyzing it, and understanding its role in storytelling and showing your audience how it affects them. The course deals with critical thinking and the methodology of using computers as an investigative tool.

**Learning Outcomes**

After successfully completing this course, you should be able to:

- Explain why media professionals use data skills
- Demonstrate how to find and retrieve data on the Internet

- Evaluate credibility of information found on the Internet/fact-check data
- “Clean” data
- Analyze data using a spreadsheet
- Use basic statistics to analyze data
- Display information visually
- Describe how to find data not on the Internet

After this course is over, the data skills you learn may slip away if you don’t use them. Even if this happens, my expectation is that two things will stick with you:

- An understanding of how data skills can help your work.
- A mindset where
  - you ask people you meet not just what they know but how they know it, and you ask to see the evidence, and

you always ask yourself the same question: What do I know and how do I know it?

### **Textbook**

*Foundations of Data & Digital Journalism*

by Alex Richards

<https://www.routledge.com/Foundations-of-Data-and-Digital-Journalism/Richards/p/book/9781032017747>

preview:

[https://www.google.com/books/edition/Foundations\\_of\\_Data\\_and\\_Digital\\_Journalism/CpeoEAAAQBAJ](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Foundations_of_Data_and_Digital_Journalism/CpeoEAAAQBAJ)

### **Technology**

Use of the MSU Desire-to-Learn (D2L) program is a part of this course. You can log into D2L through the MSU Homepage.

### **Teaching and Learning Philosophy**

*A class is a process, an independent organism with its own goals and dynamics. It is always something more than even the most imaginative lesson plan can predict.*

– Thomas P. Kasulis

We are starting with this syllabus and tentative schedule. Our class will evolve based on our work together, driven by curiosity, experimentation, and discovery.

What's most important to me is that you feel able to show up fully to our work together. I'm human first. Students are humans first. Not all of us are encountering this moment in the same ways, so each of us will have to make decisions about how we can engage. I want to be clear about several things:

- As we collaborate, I trust you to make decisions about what feels safe for you, and we all want you to do what you can to keep others safe.
- I encourage you to connect with me and your classmates in whatever ways make sense and are safest for you. Ultimately, this is a community, and there are lots of different ways we can each contribute.
- I look forward to getting to know you as a student, a creator, and a person.

### **Academic Integrity and Artificial Intelligence**

*Overarching principle:*

*In all academic work, the ideas and contributions of others must be appropriately acknowledged and work that is presented as original must be, in fact, original.*

*-- from the University of Iowa*

*Creators should be able to control what we create; appropriating others' ideas or labor without credit or attribution is theft; no creators want their stuff stolen. The entire scholarly enterprise depends upon an adherence to those norms. Citation and attribution are also important ways to ensure that scholarly discourse is open to all voices and does not silence marginalized or minority perspectives. In that regard, plagiarism can be a form of censorship, in that it removes someone's voice (and by extension, scholarly identity) from the conversation.*

*-- by [Kevin Gannon in The Chronicle of Higher Education](#)*

*In 1967, the first modern handheld calculator was introduced. Adults worried that people would lose their ability to compute or to think logically. Society had to change the way it thought about math and logic and how it was taught.*

*In 1990*, we got the first search engine and progressed through to Google. Adults worried that people would lose their ability to memorize anything. Society had to change the way it thought about information, memorization, and the nature of truth.

*In 2022*, ChatGPT was publicly released. Adults are worried that college students are now able to go through their degree programs without writing or thinking anything for themselves. Society is going to have to change the way it thinks about communication and the ways in which students can demonstrate understanding.

I am excited by ChatGPT. It is going to free up bandwidth in our currently traumatized and overloaded brains. It is going to make teaching and learning more challenging, and I like challenges.

I am also confused, concerned, and a little bit sad.

We are not going to live in a bubble where we pretend that ChatGPT does not exist, or that you won't be able to use it whenever you please after graduation.

We're going to have to figure this out together:

*What is ChatGPT good for?*

*What is it not good for?*

*What can you trust?*

*How can you check?*

I don't have all the answers to these questions right now.

Here's what we will work with for today:

- You may not type a question into ChatGPT, exactly copy and paste its response, and turn it into me as your own.
- You may not use ChatGPT without disclosing to me somewhere in your assignment that you have done so.
- All strings of four or more words that are coming from ChatGPT need to be delineated in green font.
- All tables, figures, images that come from ChatGPT need to be delineated in green font (like in the caption, or in a comment.)

- There will be times when using ChatGPT is totally fine and possibly encouraged. If I'm ever unclear, or you are unsure, you can always ask me.
- We will actively discuss ways to use ChatGPT in ways that are ethical, accurate, and useful.
- Whenever there's a rule about ChatGPT, *it applies to all forms of artificial intelligence.*

Additionally, I encourage you to work together on assignments and to make use of campus resources like Midwestern State University's [Tutoring and Academic Support Programs \(TASP\)](#) to assist you in your pursuit of academic excellence. However, you must acknowledge any collaboration or assistance that you receive on work that is to be graded, either from a person, reference, or a tool (including AI-generation tools like ChatGPT, as noted above). So, when you turn in assignments, please include a sentence at the end that says either:

1. "I worked alone on this assignment.", or
2. "I worked with \_\_\_\_\_ [person or tool] on this assignment." and/or
3. "I received assistance from \_\_\_\_\_ [person or tool] on this assignment."

Note that providing this information will only serve to help me understand you better. I strongly endorse the use of campus resources like TASP, as well as collaborative learning, when it increases your ability to succeed in this class and when it enhances your education and learning.

Telling the truth is important, and I want to support you in the ways that I can. I have a lot of respect for people who are honest about their mistakes even when it's difficult. It is much easier for current and past unethical situations to be handled in honest, non-judgmental conversation, and I hope you'll feel safe engaging in those with me if ever needed.

For instances in which we cannot agree, or are unsure of a norm, we'll consult the "University Policies and Procedures" section of the [Midwestern State University Student Handbook](#) (begins on p. 71).

## Grading

Our work together in this course will include reflecting on your own learning process and supporting the learning process of others. Ultimately, this course is about helping you find new ways into your work as a life-long learner.

Final grades will be based on the following.

<i>Assignment</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Projects	40
Assignments and quizzes	55
Professionalism	5
Total	100

Total percent for final grade.

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Percent</i>
A	90-100
B	80-89
C	70-79
D	60-69
F	Less than 60

## Class Participation and Attendance

This course will be a cooperative learning experience, a true intellectual community. You and your work are, in a very real sense, the primary texts for this course. In order for us to work together as a community, we all have to come prepared to participate. If you can't finish work for any reason, chat with me (and your collaborators) in advance.

Class meetings are our main opportunity to create knowledge together and practice the skills you are learning this semester. Your attendance is crucial to your and your peers' learning as everyone misses out on your contributions if you are not present. However, sometimes life happens. Over the course of the semester you can miss 3 class sessions without penalty. Please note that this does not include the last day of class or the day that you are scheduled for a presentation. If any other days end up not being eligible, you will be notified ahead of time. Please email me as soon as you can if you know that you will be missing class or, in the case of an unexpected emergency, as soon as possible after missing class. If you do not use these absences, then extra points will be

added to your lowest assignment score when computing your final grade (i.e., extra credit). If there are extenuating circumstances that require you to miss class repeatedly or for an extended period, please come and discuss this issue with me so I can assist in connecting you with the appropriate support.

Additionally, our class meetings will include activities; they will not be straight lecture. The activities are designed to be interesting and to help you learn. These activities will often have a credit/grade component to them. Therefore, your attendance and active participation will affect how much you learn and how well you do in the course.

Please respect yourself and your learning community by:

- behaving professionally
- arriving on time
- being prepared
- paying attention
- actively participating
- staying for the full class
- treating others with courtesy and respect
- using language thoughtfully

If you miss class, you miss the chance to participate in your education and the education of others in class. Your peers are counting on you to be in class and to participate. You are responsible for all material presented in every class period, whether present or not.

### **Professionalism**

1. You are in this class to prepare for the professional world. Treat this class like the professional world. Build habits that will support your professional success!
2. In the professional world, you do not pull out your phone for non-meeting activities (e.g., texting friends, getting on social media, etc.). If you do, there are consequences. Some of those consequences may be explicit and obvious. Others may not be obvious but can still be significant. The same goes for this course. Again, build habits that will support your professional success; don't build habits that will get in the way of your professional success.

## **Policies: Classroom/Conduct**

You are expected to adhere to the Standards of Conduct as published in the Student Handbook.

### **Cell Phones and Other Electronic Devices**

Electronic devices are welcome (encouraged) in class *to support learning*.

Two things to remember for this:

1. Please be mindful that electronic devices do not serve as a distraction to you or those around you.

Research on learning shows that unexpected noises and movement automatically divert and capture people's attention, which means you are affecting everyone's learning experience if your cell phone, pager, laptop, etc. makes noise or is visually distracting during class.

2. I want our classroom to be free to have an open discussion. It's hard to have an open discussion when you know you are being recorded for everyone to see forever. Therefore, no one is to use any recording devices or recording media during the class unless we all decide, as a class, that this is okay. If recording class is needed as a learning accommodation, please see me so that we can discuss privacy guidelines.

### **Accommodations**

If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, if you have emergency medical information that needs sharing, or if you need special accommodations in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible. Please also contact [Disability Support Services](#) at 940-397-4140 in Clark Student Center, room 168, to document and coordinate reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities if you have not already done so. I want to work together to make sure the course meets your needs. You do not need to divulge any personal information in order to have these conversations or to receive accommodations. I trust you. Learning is something we do together. And, of course, I will hold information you do share with me in confidence unless you give me permission to do otherwise. If you do not require accommodations due to a disability, understand that some of your



fellow students might, and it is important to me that you do not make assumptions about where, when, or how they learn.

### **Privacy**

Federal privacy law prohibits me from releasing information about students to certain parties outside of the university without the signed consent of the student.

### **COVID-19 – Vaccinations and Face Coverings**

Scientific data shows that being fully vaccinated is the most effective way to prevent and slow the spread of COVID-19 and has the greatest probability of avoiding serious illness if infected in all age groups. Although MSU Texas is not mandating vaccinations in compliance with Governor Abbott’s executive orders, we highly encourage eligible members of our community to get a vaccination. If you have questions or concerns about the vaccine, please contact your primary care physician or health care professional. Although MSU Texas is not currently requiring facial coverings, they have been an effective strategy in slowing the spread.

### **Core Values**

In this class we will strive to uphold the same shared core values that unite all Midwestern State University faculty, staff, and students:

- Engage others with respect, empathy, and joy (people-centered)
- Cultivating a diverse and inclusive campus environment (community)
- Always doing the right thing (integrity)
- Adopting innovative ideas to pioneer new paths (visionary)
- Valuing relationships with broader communities (connections)

(see <https://msutexas.edu/about/values-journey/index.php> for more details)

I consider the classroom to be a place where ALL students will be treated with respect as human beings, regardless of race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, sexuality, ability, class, religious affiliation, political beliefs, age, and other cultural identities and material circumstances. Moreover, diversity of thought is appreciated and encouraged, provided we can agree to disagree.

While some of the work for this course will be done independently or with a small group, think of all your peers as an audience for your work, as well as a source

for feedback and encouragement. Draw on their expertise. This class will be as much (or more) about you teaching yourselves and each other as it is about me teaching you. Because of this, it's important that we create a community of belonging that is respectful of our differences and offers space for the boundary-setting necessary for positive relationships to form.

We are all responsible to ensure the classroom is a safe environment. This includes not posting classroom activities or materials to social media without the consent of everyone involved.

### **Managing Stress**

You may experience situations or challenges that can interfere with learning and interpersonal functioning including stress, anxiety, depression, alcohol and/or other drug use, concern for a friend or family member, loss, sleep difficulties, feeling hopeless or relationship problems.

There are many helpful resources available on campus and an important part of the college experience is learning how to ask for help. Asking for support sooner rather than later is almost always helpful.

There are numerous campus resources available to you including:

- Psychology Clinic (940-397-4791 or [psychology.clinic@msutexas.edu](mailto:psychology.clinic@msutexas.edu))  
<https://msutexas.edu/academics/libarts/psychology/clinic>
- MSU Counseling Center (940-397-4618)  
<https://msutexas.edu/student-life/counseling/>
- Vinson Health Center (940-397-4231 or [vinson@msutexas.edu](mailto:vinson@msutexas.edu))  
<https://msutexas.edu/healthcenter/>
- Bruce and Graciela Redwine Student Wellness Center (940-397-4206)  
<https://msutexas.edu/student-life/wellness-center>
- Online resources  
<https://msutexas.edu/student-life/counseling/online-resources>
- Self-help apps  
<https://msutexas.edu/student-life/counseling/self-help-apps>

If you are experiencing an emergency, call 911 or the MSU Police Department at 940-397-4239. If you or someone you know is in a domestic violence or

sexual assault crisis situation and wants information on what to do, call the 24 Hour Crisis Hotline: 1-800-621-8504.

Additional mental-health resources are available at <https://msutexas.edu/student-life/counseling/mental-health-resources>.

If you have outside circumstances that may affect your performance in this class – including but not limited to difficulty affording groceries or accessing sufficient food to eat every day, inadequate housing, family issues – please contact me if you are comfortable in doing so. I may be able to refer you to on-campus resources that will help you address the situation.

Please note that all information provided to me remains confidential.

### **Portfolio Requirement**

Please note that all mass communication majors are required to submit a portfolio as part of their Internship course (Internship is a prerequisite to Senior Production, the mass communication capstone project course). The portfolio requirement is a part of MSU's reaccreditation with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Through the portfolio, you are required to demonstrate communication competence through the written word and visual communication; two examples of each competency are required.

As you go through this and other classes, you are responsible for saving course work that could be included in your portfolio.

Please see me, your adviser, the department chair or any mass communication faculty member for handouts with more information ("Mass Communication Portfolio Competencies" and "Mass Communication Portfolio FAQ"). These handouts are also available on our department web page.

### **Research and Creative Activity Opportunities at MSU**

Enhancing Undergraduate Research Endeavors and Creative Activities (EURECA) is a program that provides opportunities for undergraduates to engage in high-quality research and creative activities with faculty. EURECA provides incentives and funding through a system that supports faculty and students engaged in collaborative research and creative works. For more information contact the

Office of Undergraduate Research at (940) 397-6274 or by email at [eureca@msutexas.edu](mailto:eureca@msutexas.edu). You can also stop by the UGR office located in the atrium of the Clark Student Center, room 161. Information and resources are also available at the EURECA web page at <https://msutexas.edu/eureca>.

### **Undergraduate Research Opportunities and Summer Workshop (UGROW)**

Like EURECA, UGROW provides opportunities for students to conduct research with faculty. However, the research occurs in the summer. For five weeks UGROW students experience the authenticity of scientific research as well as research and creative activities in art, music, theater education, business, health and social sciences, English, history, etc. in a highly interdisciplinary environment. Students work on projects of their choice and present their findings at the end of program and the MSU Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity Forum. If you have any questions, call (940) 397-4253 or by email at [ugrow@msutexas.edu](mailto:ugrow@msutexas.edu). More information and resources are available at the UGROW web page at <https://msutexas.edu/ugrow>.

### **Council on Undergraduate Research**

To support undergraduate research and creative activities, Midwestern State University holds an enhanced institutional membership with the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR). This institutional membership includes unlimited memberships for any interested faculty, staff, and students. Students may find information on benefits and resources at [https://www.cur.org/engage/undergraduate/student\\_resource\\_center](https://www.cur.org/engage/undergraduate/student_resource_center).

### **Important Dates**

Last day for term schedule changes: Thursday, August 31, 2023

Deadline to file for graduation: Monday, September 25, 2023

Last Day to drop with a grade of "W:" 4 p.m. on Monday, October 30, 2023

Refer to: [Drops, Withdrawals & Void](#)

### **Topics/Schedule**

Course topics support achieving our course objectives. Course topics include:

- ⇒ Weeks 1 & 2: Introductions, course expectations
- ⇒ Weeks 3 & 4: Career exploration, data processes and habits, first story (find data, download data, verify/clean data, functions, formulas, visualization)

- ⇒ Weeks 5 & 6: Critiques assignment, second story (reinforce learning from first story)
- ⇒ Weeks 7 & 8: Third story (build on learning from first and second stories)
- ⇒ Week 9-11: Fourth story
- ⇒ Week 12-13: Fifth story
- ⇒ Week 14-15: Reflection

Please note this is a TENTATIVE schedule. This schedule is likely to change.

### **Suggestions**

- Attend class regularly.
- Remember I am available to help you. Ask for help immediately if you don't understand something. Waiting to "get it later" doesn't always work and could get you into trouble.
- Back up your work. Have two backups.
- Consider saving your work under different names literally each time you work on a project. It just takes one click and could save you lots of time and frustration.
- Expect the unexpected.
- Try to do work for this class ahead of time. This will give you some cushion in case you have problems.
- Sometimes things will go smoothly, other times they won't – the important thing is to have fun and practice thinking and working with both sides of our brains.
- This is **your** class; we can do (or try) almost anything you want; be creative!

### **In closing:**

In the words of our chair, Dr. Jim Sernoe,

- Do not hesitate to contact me with questions, concerns and, even better, great suggestions. I go out of my way to be fair to all.
- By accepting this syllabus and staying enrolled in this course, you are indicating that you understand and accept the terms of this syllabus.

*My work has been influenced by many people. Specifically, I have used and adapted work from [Jesse Stommel](#), [Jill Hogan](#), and [Carnegie Mellon University](#).*