



Course Syllabus: Computer-Assisted Reporting

Lamar D. Fain College of Fine Arts
MCOM 4223 Section 101
Fall 2019 T/Th 2:00-3:20

Contact Information

Instructor: Dr. Mitzi Lewis

Office: Fain Fine Arts Center D203

Office hours: M/W 11:30-noon, 3-4:30 | T/H 9-9:30 | by appointment

Office phone: (940) 397-4375

Twitter: @mitzilewis

E-mail: mitzi.lewis@msutexas.edu

NOTE: For all e-mail correspondence, please make the subject line look like this:

CAR: Subject of Message

If you send an email to me, treat it as a professional means of communication.

This means it should include a salutation, correct punctuation, and a proper closing.

Course Description

This course introduces you to techniques of computer-assisted reporting. Building upon your basic reporting and critical thinking skills, the course will show you how to use the computer as a tool in information gathering and data analysis. You will learn how to find and critically evaluate information from the Internet, principally the World Wide Web. Next, you will review statistics and mathematical relationships, such as percentage change, and analyze data using a spreadsheet. You will download data from the Web and analyze it. These efforts will become the basis for asking questions for stories. The data analysis is only the beginning. Anyone familiar with a computer can squeeze answers out of a computer, but it takes a competent journalist to ask the right questions. You must determine the meaning of the information and show your viewers, readers, or listeners how it affects them.

Objectives

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

- Define computer-assisted reporting
- Explain why media professionals use computer-assisted reporting skills
- Demonstrate how to find and retrieve data on the Internet
- Locate primary and secondary sources on the Internet
- Understand how to use this information to establish accountability and improve interview techniques
- Evaluate credibility of information found on the Internet
- Analyze data using Excel
- Use basic statistics to analyze data for reporting
- Display information visually
- Describe the uses of database managers
- Describe how to find data not on the Internet
- Explain how to build a database
- Fact-check data
- “Clean” data
- Recognize that computer-assisted reporting is just one tool in your arsenal; the fundamentals of reporting still apply: accuracy, clarity, fairness, news value, and, ultimately, good storytelling

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 computer-assisted reporting can help your work.
- A mindset where
 - you ask people you meet while reporting 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?

Required Materials

- I have decided not to require a textbook this semester; however, you will receive numerous handouts and exercises over the course of the semester.
- USB flash drive
- Bring this to class each day. You'll be saving your work to this drive and to a second backup, not the lab computer hard drive. You are responsible for saving your work. Deadlines will not be extended due to loss of data.

Always maintain at least two copies of important files on two separate volumes. I HIGHLY recommend checking out cloud storage options and selecting one to use.

- Persistence, patience, optimism, and an active mind: Most of our work during the semester will take place in the computer lab. This room is equipped with 21 computers and several printers. Computers are fairly elaborate machines, which means that there are many ways in which they can break down. In this course, we will be placing heavy demands on the lab's hardware and software – as well as on our network capabilities – so be prepared for many strange and wondrous things. We will be discussing basic trouble-shooting techniques in class as issues arise. In many cases, however, you will need to be your own technological problem-solver – identifying problems and figuring out ways they can temporarily or permanently be solved. *Techno-whining is not helpful and will not be tolerated.*

Desire-to-Learn (D2L)

Use of the MSU D2L program is a part of this course. Each student is expected to be familiar with this program. You can log into [D2L](#) through the MSU Homepage. If you experience difficulties, please contact the technicians listed for the program or contact your instructor.

Teaching and Learning Philosophy

Students' responsibility: Take responsibility for your own learning and take advantage of in- and out-of-classroom opportunities

Professor's (facilitator's) responsibility: Provide students with meaningful learning opportunities in the classroom and through assignments

Grading

Final grades will be based on the following.

Assignments	Percent
Projects	30%
Assignments and quizzes	35%

Assignments	Percent
Exams	30%
Professionalism	5%
Total Percent	100%

Total percent for final grade.

Grade	Percent
A	90-100%
B	80-89%
C	70-79%
D	60-69%
F	Less than 60%

Class Participation and Attendance

Because abundant lecturing tends to be counterproductive for both you and me, I try to include activities that are more interesting than straight lecture, such as discussions, presentations, field trips, guest speakers, etc. The success of this format depends on your willingness to **actively participate** in class discussions and other activities.

Attendance and participation are critical to your success. Another way to describe this is professionalism. **Professionalism** means that you're here, ready to engage in new opportunities.

The college learning environment is a professional environment. It is similar in many ways to a professional work environment. You are expected to demonstrate professional attitudes and behaviors; including, but not limited to, arriving on time, being prepared, actively participating, communicating respectfully, and staying for the full class period. 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. A peer evaluation will be distributed toward the end of the semester.

If you miss class without an acceptable excuse you get a **zero** for that day's participation and class work and any work that is due.

If you must miss class, please let me know BEFORE the class period that you will miss. You may call my office and leave me a voice mail or you may notify me by e-mail. An absence may be excused at my discretion in accordance with university policy if you provide documentation of the reason for your absence. When you have an acceptable excuse, you are responsible for finding out what you missed and arranging to make it up with the instructor. Missed work must be made up within one week of when your return to class, or you will receive a zero.

Plan carefully regarding appointments and/or work schedules to avoid missing class. Any personal emergencies that arise will be dealt with on an individual basis. Do not assume you will be allowed to make up assignments missed during an unexcused absence. If you MISS CLASS, it is **YOUR** responsibility to find out what you missed. I DO NOT HAVE TIME TO PROVIDE INDIVIDUAL "MAKE-UPS" TO MISSED CLASS SESSIONS. THIS IS WHY WE HAVE CLASS MEETINGS.

In class assignments will help you immediately apply concepts covered in class. If you miss a class you get a "zero" for that day's in-class assignments. If you miss more than two classes, or if you are habitually late or leave early, **your final grade may be lowered by 1/2 letter grade for each instance beyond two absences**. Two tardies = one absence. One minute to 19 minutes late = one tardy. Twenty minutes or more late = one absence. Leaving before class is dismissed = one absence. After three absences or tardies, you are subject to being dropped from the course with a grade of "F."

I reserve the right to determine what, exactly, constitutes an excused absence or when a late arrival is excusable.

Finally, it is unacceptable to skip another class to work on a project for this class. Do not ask me for an excused absence to work on another course. Plan accordingly and be organized.

Some additional guidelines:

- You are responsible for all material presented in every class period, whether present or not.
- If you miss a class period you should obtain the material presented from another classmate. (I will not repeat lecture material that was missed.)

Handouts are available from my office – it is your responsibility to come get them.)

Assignments and Quizzes

Homework will be assigned periodically throughout the semester to reinforce ideas discussed in class. There will be announced quizzes on course material.

We will have unannounced quizzes only if attendance is poor or if I sense that you are not keeping up with your assignments. If we have unannounced quizzes, they will be given at the beginning of class. If you are late, you will receive a score of zero unless your late arrival is excused.

Please note that the number of quizzes and assignments is not set in stone. This means that it is impossible at the outset of the semester to determine how much each individual quiz or assignment will be worth.

Exams

Many of the course objectives will be measured via exams. The exams focus on the skills learned on the exercises.

More about Grading

- In the professional world, if you can't show up on time and make your deadlines, you won't keep your job. Assignments must be completed on time in the format specified.
- Reading assignments are to be completed by the day they are assigned.
- Assignments are due at the beginning of class on the due date.
- Spelling and grammar count, in your assignments and your e-mails. Grades will be reduced for spelling and grammar errors.
- If you know you will be absent when an assignment is due, arrange to complete and hand in the assignment early.
- You are responsible for keeping all handouts and graded assignments.
- Remember that attendance is required and missing class can result in a grade reduction, a failing grade, or being dropped from class.

Critiques

Critiques are a vital part of learning. You can learn a lot from reviewing the work of others and evaluating their reporting strengths and weaknesses. Critiques also

provide the opportunity to put concepts to words, and to help you learn how to speak intelligently and knowledgeably (a necessary skill for survival in the workplace!). We will critique published work. This will provide you with fresh insights and perspectives. Bringing examples of stories/series that made use of computer-assisted reporting techniques to class for discussion, which you will lead, will be a part of your homework grade. We will discuss answers to the following questions about the stories:

- Briefly summarize the story.
- What was the main point of the story?
- What question(s) did the story answer?
- How did the story idea originate?
- How many people worked on the story? What were their roles?
- How was computer-assisted reporting used to help write the story?
- How were data/records obtained?
- What format were the data in?
- What type of analysis was performed?
- What skills are needed for this type of analysis?
- What resources were required?
- Were there obstacles? If so, what were they and how were they overcome?
- How was the story reported? Data? Visualization? Putting a face to the story? Etc.
- What were the results of the story after publishing? Other stories? Changes in the
- community? Etc.
- How could the story and/or process be improved?
- What wasn't explored that might be worth exploring?
- What have you learned through this critique that will help you when you are doing
- computer-assisted reporting?

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). This requirement is a part of MSU's reaccreditation with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and is non-negotiable. Through the portfolio, students 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](#).

Policies: Classroom/Conduct/Academic Dishonesty

- Classroom behavior that interferes with either the instructor’s ability to conduct the class or the ability of other students to benefit from the instruction will result in the instructor’s removing the disruptive student(s) from the class.
- Eating and drinking are not allowed by the computers because we are working with expensive equipment that can very easily be damaged by food or drink. Food and drink may be left on the bookcase by the door. Any misuse or abuse of equipment will result in expulsion from the lab for the semester and/or assessment of replacement/repair costs.
- Students are expected to adhere to the Standards of Conduct as published in the Student Handbook. Students should refer to the current MSU student handbook and activities calendar for University policies and Student Honor Creed on academic dishonesty, class attendance, student’s rights, and activities.
 - a. The main statement from the MSU Student Honor Creed should be a guiding principal for you: “As an MSU student, I pledge not to lie, cheat, steal, or help anyone else to do so.”
 - b. I reserve the right to drop any student with an F if he/she engages in any form of academic dishonesty. I further reserve the right to recommend other sanctions as may be appropriate. Students are also encouraged to consult the following sources for additional discussion of students’ rights and responsibilities regarding cheating, attendance and general conduct:
 - i. The MSU Student Honor Creed
 - ii. *MSU Undergraduate Catalog*
 - iii. *MSU Student Handbook*

- c. In addition, the university requires faculty to provide this statement to all students: "By enrolling in this course, the student expressly grants MSU a "limited right" in all intellectual property created by the student for the purpose of this course. The "limited right" shall include but shall not be limited to the right to reproduce the student's work product in order to verify originality and authenticity, and educational purposes."
- On the Internet, plagiarism is especially easy. DO NOT give in to the temptation to copy-and-paste other people's work! YOUR WORK MUST BE YOUR OWN. If you plagiarize as a professional and get found out, you will damage if not destroy your own reputation and do great harm to the reputation of any organization you work for. In this class, plagiarism will have dire consequences.

Plagiarism: Plagiarism comes from the Latin word *plagiarius*, which means kidnapper. Webster's Dictionary defines plagiarize as to take (ideas, writings, etc.,) from (another) and pass them off as one's own-plagiator. Plagiarism includes the deliberate as well as inadvertent failure to properly attribute. All of the work you do in this class should be the work of you. **Violation of this policy will result in the student and/or group receiving a failing grade for this course. IGNORANCE IS NO EXCUSE...IF IN DOUBT-ASK! Students in this course should adhere to the MSU Student Honor Code.**

Additional guidelines on procedures in these matters may be found in the [Office of Student Conduct](#).

Cell Phones and Other Recording Devices: The use of cell phones and other recording or electronic devices is strictly prohibited during class. I may direct, from time to time, on the possible use of cell phones for legitimate class reasons. Recording the class is prohibited, unless it is part of a reasonable accommodation under ADA, or by obtaining written consent by me.

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. Thus, in almost all cases I will not discuss your academic progress or other matters with your parents. Please do not have them call me. Regardless of

these important legal considerations, it is my general policy to communicate with the students, not their parents, even when a student has signed a consent form. College students are adults and are expected to behave accordingly.

Social Justice

Social justice is one of Midwestern State University's stated core values, and I consider the classroom to be a place where students will be treated with respect as human beings, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, political beliefs, age, or ability. Moreover, diversity of thought is appreciated and encouraged, provided the students can agree to disagree. It is my expectation that ALL students be able to consider the classroom a safe environment.

Managing Stress

Students 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 numerous campus resources available to students including:

- [MSU Counseling Center](#) (940-397-4618),
- [Vinson Health Center](#) (940-397-4231), and
- [Bruce and Graciela Redwine Student Wellness Center](#) (940-397-4206).

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.

Services for Students with Disabilities

In accordance with Section 504 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Midwestern State University endeavors to make reasonable accommodations to ensure equal opportunity for qualified persons with disabilities to participate in all educational, social, and recreational programs and activities. After notification of acceptance, students requiring accommodations should make application for such assistance through Disability

Support Services, located in the Clark Student Center, Room 168, (940) 397-4140. Current documentation of a disability will be required in order to provide appropriate services, and each request will be individually reviewed. For more details, please go to [Disability Support Services](#).

Writing Center

Begin drafting papers as early as possible and take advantage of the MSU Writing Center, located off the 2nd floor atrium of Prothro-Yeager! Writing tutors will not edit your papers for you, but they will provide support and feedback at every stage of the writing process, from brainstorming to drafting, revising to proofreading. Hours and more will be posted at the [Writing Center 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@mwsu.edu or better yet, 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](#).

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. Faculty members will introduce their research ideas February 13th, 2019, at 5:00 p.m., Comanche Suites, Clark Student Center. A break-out session with individual faculty members will follow. If you have any questions, contact the Office of Undergraduate Research at (940) 397-6274 or by email

at eureca@mwsu.edu. More information and resources are available at the [UGROW web page](#).

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 find information on benefits and resources at the [CUR web page](#) and sign up *at no cost* at the [new member web page](#).

CUR Undergraduate Resources Webpage contains:

- Research Opportunities;
- Presentation Opportunities;
- Undergraduate Research Journals;
- CUR-Sponsored Student Events;
- The Registry of Undergraduate Researchers;
- And more!

ScholarBridge

Midwestern State University is excited to announce a new resource designed to address a commonly expressed student need—the creation of a centralized searchable database of faculty research interests and opportunities. We have entered into a partnership with [ScholarBridge](#), a website designed to help students participate in undergraduate research and creative activities.

Topics/Schedule

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

- ⇒ Weeks 1 & 2: Introductions, course expectations, defining computer-assisted reporting, case studies
- ⇒ 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: Midterm, third story (build on learning from first and second stories)

- ⇒ Week 9-11: Critiques
- ⇒ Week 12-13: Fourth story
- ⇒ Week 14-15: Fifth story
- ⇒ Week 16: Final

Please note this is a TENTATIVE schedule. Due to storms, last-minute changes, extended class discussions and my frequent inability to stick to the agenda I set at the beginning of the course, this schedule is likely to change. I reserve the right to change the class schedule if circumstances make it necessary.

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!

Final Caveat: I reserve the right to change any part of this syllabus for any reason. This includes changing or deleting assignments. Sufficient notice will be given to you if changes to the syllabus are necessary.

By accepting this syllabus and staying enrolled in this course, you are indicating that you understand and accept the terms of this syllabus.

Thanks to Bill Dedmon, David Herzog, and Stan Ketterer who generously allowed me to use portions of their work, to Naoma Clark, Jim Sernoe, and Jim Gorham who allowed me to adapt portions of their classroom policies, and to Kimberly Sultze of Saint Michael's College for sharing her intellectual requirements.