

Journalism 547 -- Precision Reporting

Chris Roberts, instructor
Fall 2006 – The University of South Carolina

When and where we meet

Join me from 8 to 9:15 A.M. on Tuesdays in Room 111 of Davis College.

How to find me

Room 4016 in the Coliseum, down what used to be called the Radio/TV hall. You also can reach me:

- weekdays until 5 P.M., call 777-4979.
- before 9 P.M. on evenings, call 781-7601.
- during office hours: 9 to 11 A.M. on Mondays/Wednesdays, and 2 to 4 P.M. on Tuesdays/Thursdays.
- with electronic mail, send it to c@sc.edu.

Don't be shy in calling or writing with your questions.

What's the point of this?

This class used to be called "computer-assisted reporting," a name that sounds as silly as "telephone-assisted" or "typewriter-assisted" reporting.

But just as reporters a century ago discovered they couldn't live without those newfangled phones and typewriters, today's reporters cannot live without computers. Those machines, along with traditional shoe-leather reporting, let journalists generate stories they couldn't produce easily (or at all) just a few years ago.

Until computers came along, reporters either had to trust studies done by others (who often were untrustworthy) or survive the tedious, time-consuming task of analyzing data by hand. Today, with computers and the same data that academics and governments use, reporters ask their own questions and produce their own results. Instead of relying on anecdotes and writing about individual trees, you can write about the whole forest. Or you can quickly find the most newsworthy trees.

To tell those stories, you've got to learn to be both the organ grinder and his monkey. So you'll spend this semester learning some basic, "now-click-this-key" technical skills. But more importantly, you'll think about the big picture. When we're done, you'll have a combination of geek and thinking skills that will make you eminently more employable.

We'll discuss how to:

- Locate and create data. (*Or, keystrokes and fixed-lengths and FOIAs, oh my!*)
- Do the boring stuff needed to make the computer spit out its results. (*Or, why "parsing the fixed-length" isn't kinky.*)
- Turn data into stories without news consumers drowning in an ocean of numbers. (*Or, forgo the MEGO.*)
- Find pitfalls in databases. (*Or, why all data are dirty.*)
- Do the arithmetic. (*Or, "But I'm in journalism because I can't do math."*)
- Use computer-assisted reporting in a variety of beats. (*Or, why I firmly believe that government's true function is to count stuff.*)
- Harness computer-assisted reporting for a variety of mediums – print, broadcast and Web publishing. (*Or, thinking long, short and graphically.*)
- Search the Internet efficiently – and whether to trust what you've found. (*Or, why tildes are hinky.*)

A few of the useful Web sites you'll be using

www.chrisrob.com
www.census.gov

www.ire.org
www.fedstats.gov

www.nicar.org
www.scstatehouse.net

To thrive in this class, you'll need...

- ...Not worry much about computer skills to begin with. We'll gently walk you through the basics of Excel, Access, etc. If you're particularly nervous or wealthy, feel free to buy a copy of *Excel for Dummies, Idiots, Morons, Maroons, Poltroons, etc.* (If you don't know your way around the basics of Windows and Macintosh operating systems, however, please see me immediately.)
- ...To follow a daily newspaper. Successful journalists study the styles and techniques of people already in the business. And you must know what's going on in the world, because uninformed reporters are useless reporters.
- ...An e-mail address. The university will give you one if you've lived this long without one.
- ...To keep up with the assigned readings in our thin textbook (see below) as well as other readings I'll assign throughout the semester.
- ...To spend some money. You must possess:
 - *Computer-Assisted Reporting: A Practical Guide* (third edition) by Brant Houston, St. Martin's Press, New York, 2004. (He's a very nice guy from Connecticut, in case you're wondering.)

Attendance policy

If I must be here weekly, so should you. So do your dead-level best to be here every time, on time and ready to go. Showing up late messes us all up.

A piece of your grade will come from exercises performed or assigned in class. Most of the skills you'll need to do those exercises will be taught in class, and skills are built upon previous skills. (Example: If you can't sort in Excel and understand how it works, heaven help you try to make a pivot table.)

The obligatory paragraph about cheating

Your instructor is a Southern Baptist deacon who knows that "Thou shalt not steal" is in Exodus 20:15. He's also a journalist who remembers what happened when Janet Cooke's bosses, albeit way too late, discovered that Jimmy wasn't real. The consequences are real: If you're caught cheating, you'll earn a failing grade and be reported to school officials.

Making the grade

If you do the work and show some pride, this can be Hamburger Helper[®] for your GPA. The grading breaks down this way:

- **In-class assignments:** 20 percent
Come to class, stay awake, do the work, earn full marks. (Note: You must be present to win. If you miss a class in which a grade is taken, there is no opportunity to make up that work.)
- **Homework assignments:** 20 percent
Do the work, do it right, earn full marks. I'll try not to burden you with too much out-of-class stuff, but the last guy who told you life was fair was trying to sell you something.
- **Critique a CAR project:** 10 percent
During this semester, I'll assign you to find a computer-assisted journalism project done by a real media outlet. You will write a review, analysis and critique. (More details about this assignment will come.)
- **The stories:** 50 percent
In concert with *The Carolina Reporter*, you will be required to write at least two stories that are (at least in part) based on data that you gather and analyze. It can be as complicated as a data-driven project that rely heavily on data analysis, or a "computer-assisted paragraph" that puts the backbone into a feature story. I will read budget lines you submit to Cecile Holmes and help you find datasets or other information to boost your story. Your grade is based upon the quality of the data in the story and the quality of the writing of that part of the story.

About the instructor

Chris Roberts joined the USC faculty in January 2006 after 25 years as a reporter and editor. He was the first database editor at both *The Birmingham News* and *The State* newspapers, wrote a nationally syndicated technology column for Newhouse News Service in the 1990s, has been a speaker at numerous National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting international conferences, and has taught computer-assisted reporting at USC off and on since 2000.