

# Computer-Assisted Reporting Journalism 389 Spring Semester 2007

**Tuesdays, 5:45 p.m. to 8:45 p.m.**

**101 Davee Library (Gray Lab)**

**Instructor:** MaryJo Webster

**Contact information:** [mary.webster@uwrf.edu](mailto:mary.webster@uwrf.edu) or 651-491-6576. The best way to reach me outside of class is via email. Please use the phone number only in cases of emergency. An alternate email is [maryjo.sylwester@gmail.com](mailto:maryjo.sylwester@gmail.com)

I will not have designated office hours, but I will be available at the conclusion of each class to meet either in the computer lab or, if privacy is needed, in the journalism office in North Hall. I would recommend setting up an appointment to meet with me, by contacting me via email in advance. We could also schedule a phone consultation if necessary.

## **Course description:**

This is a practical, hands-on course on techniques that will enhance your reporting skills, primarily how to analyze electronic data to look for patterns and trends, or to support or debunk something you are reporting on. Although we will spend a great deal of time on how to use Microsoft Excel and Access software, this is not a class about computer programs; it's a class about good reporting practices. Learning the software is just one way to become a better reporter.

You'll also learn how to:

- find and obtain data
- use public records laws
- build your own dataset when one doesn't already exist
- use numbers effectively and accurately in stories
- produce news stories that go beyond anecdotes and quotes
- be a more efficient reporter
- organize and manage large amounts of information
- think about a topic analytically

Even if you don't intend to become a reporter after graduation, this class will provide you with valuable skills. You will learn how to use software that is commonly used in many businesses and, more importantly, you'll learn research and analytical thinking skills that can be applied in many occupations.

## **Attendance and participation:**

These are the most important aspects of this class. Learning CAR is a sequential process. If you miss one step, you'll have a hard time catching up with the class on the next step. Another reason that attendance is a significant factor for this course in particular is that we meet only once per week and we will cover a lot of ground in each of those three-hour blocks.

Participation is also important because asking questions is what we do as journalists. You'll be

expected to do that when you have a job, so it's a good time to start practicing.

Notify the instructor in advance if you are unable to attend class (emergencies excepted). Email me or leave a phone message. Missed course work may be made up only if you have been ill and notified the instructor, or if you had an emergency.

**Class format:**

Generally, each class will consist of some class discussion and some hands-on work with spreadsheets or databases. There will be one class held in the GIS lab in the geography department (KFA) so that we can use mapping software. We'll take a 10-minute break about halfway through each session.

Short, unscheduled quizzes will be given on a regular, although random, basis to make sure that you're keeping up with the material from the discussion portion of the class. There will be two exams, both open book.

You'll be required to read one or more assigned readings in advance of each class; this will be something related to the topic that will make up the class discussion portion so it is crucial that you read the material before coming to class.

Several assignments will require you to analyze data and generate a "story memo." This is essentially a "mini" story based on your analysis and other reporting, but that also includes information that you would typically tell your editor if you were doing this at a real news organization. We will discuss the content and format of story memos in class.

**Group project:**

You will be divided up into small groups (probably 2 or 3). Each group will choose a story topic that they would like to pursue. The story topic must involve some data analysis using Excel and/or Access and must be one that would be of interest to local media outlets (such as the Student Voice, River Falls Journal, Hudson Observer, WRFW, or other news organization).

As a group, you will be responsible to:

- Choose a topic and write a memo outlining the idea (due Feb 13)
- Divvy up necessary reporting efforts among group members
- Find and request pertinent data
- Work with instructor to ensure the topic is newsworthy, manageable and focused. Part of one class will be devoted to short meetings between each group and the instructor to discuss progress.
- Make a presentation to the class, as if you were pitching the story to an editor for publication
- Write a detailed story memo, including remaining questions and other notes for an editor (due at the time of the class presentations) and submit evidence of data analysis

As an individual, you will be responsible to:

- Write progress memos that are due on assigned dates (throughout the semester)
- Work cooperatively with your teammates.
- Perform all data analysis (all members must work with the data individually, which will also serve as a "check" to make sure the analysis was done properly) and submit evidence of this analysis (due at the time of the class presentations)

- Ask questions of your classmates (those not on your team) during the group presentations. Pretend that you are an editor and play devil's advocate, if necessary, to make sure they have considered all reporting avenues and angles on the story.

Progress memos should be written as a sort of journal, chronicling what you as an individual have done on the project, as well as the group as a whole. This should include your thoughts on the experience, reporting questions or angles that you would like to pursue from this point forward and brief descriptions about any information you've gathered that may end up in the story. (See the example posted in the Content section here)

We'll discuss the content/format of the final story memo in class later in the semester.

The story does not need to be published. Grades will be given based on effort and meeting all sub-assignments (story memos, progress memos, etc). You will be graded individually, so it's possible that members of the same team might not all receive the same grade.

Grade Points, total 200:

- Initial story memo (submitted by group), due Feb 13: 10 points
- Progress memo 1 (submitted by individual), due March 6: 20 points
- Progress memo 2 (submitted by individual), due March 27: 20 points
- Progress memo 3 (submitted by individual), due April 10: 20 points
- Data analysis (submitted by individual), due April 24: 40 points
- Group presentation (tentatively scheduled for April 24): 40 points
- Final story memo (submitted by group), due April 24: 50 points

### **Grading:**

Your final grade will be based on the percentage of the total points you accumulate throughout the semester. Total points for each graded item are as follows:

Class attendance: 10 points each class (15%)

Quizzes: 25 points each (10%)

Exams: 100 points each (25%)

Group project: 200 points (25%)

Other assignments: 25 points each (25%)

Your final grade will be determined as follows:

94-100% = A

90-93% = A-

87-89% = B+

83-86% = B

80-82% = B-

77-79% = C+

73-76% = C

70-72% = C-

60-69% = D

<60% = F

### **Reading materials:**

**Required text:** "Computer-Assisted Reporting: A Practical Guide," 3rd edition. This is available from Textbook Services.

Each week throughout the semester I will provide you either paper copies or electronic copies of other reading materials. This might include stories published by various news organizations, chapters of other books, or articles from journalism trade publications.

**Recommended texts:**

"Numbers in the Newsroom," by Sarah Cohen. Available from the [IRE Bookstore](#)

"Mapping for Stories," by Jennifer LaFleur and Andy Lehren. Also available from the IRE Bookstore.

"Precision Journalism: A Reporter's Introduction to Social Science Methods," 4th edition, by Philip Meyer. Available through online bookstores.

**General rules:**

- No food or drink in the lab.
- Please turn off your cell phone during class.
- Please do not check email or surf the Internet during class. Anyone caught doing this during class will not receive attendance points for that class.
- UWRF and College of Arts & Sciences standards for academic conduct apply in this course.
- You'll also be expected to abide by basic journalism tenets: absolutely no plagiarism or fabrication; always use attribution appropriately; follow journalistic style (either AP style or the equivalent broadcast style) and make sure to use proper spelling and grammar in all assignments.

**Class schedule:**

This will definitely change as the semester goes on. The most current schedule — including all required assignment and exam dates — will be posted on D2L. This is merely a general guide for what will be covered, including both the discussion and the hands-on portions of the class.

January 23: Intro to CAR; Basic Excel

January 30: Finding and obtaining data; Basic Excel

February 6: Using public records laws; Intermediate Excel

February 13: Group project mtgs; Learning the lingo; Excel review

February 20: Using Census FactFinder; Importing into Excel

February 27: FIRST EXAM. Asking questions of your data; Intro to Access

March 6: Documenting your analysis; Access queries

March 13: NO CLASS — SPRING BREAK

March 20: Summarizing in Access

March 27: Joining in Access and basic SQL

April 3: How to make data visual using mapping; Importing to Access

April 10: GIS Mapping. **Class meets in the GIS lab of the Geography department in the Kleinpell Fine Arts Building.**

April 17: Dirty data and other pitfalls; Data cleaning techniques

April 24: Group project presentations (tentatively scheduled).

May 1: Innumeracy, Statistics and Polls

FINAL EXAM: Tuesday, May 8th, 6 to 8 p.m.