

COMMUNICATION STUDIES 460, COMMUNICATION RESEARCH METHODS
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office hours: Mon. 9-10, Wed. 12:15-1:00, Fri. 12:15-2:00 or by appointment (use email please)

Course Web page: www.cas.umt.edu/dcs/Faculty/sillars/comm460

Text

Baxter, L. A. & Babbie, E. (2004). *The basics of communication research*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Course description

This course will introduce you to the process of doing social research. Class members will learn how to gather, analyze, and report research data. A variety of methods used in communication research will be introduced, including surveys, experiments, and content analysis. Although both qualitative and quantitative methods are used in communication research, this course will be primarily concerned with quantitative methods. To get practical experience, you will form a research team with other class members and pursue your own research project.

Co-requisites

A course in statistics is required as a prerequisite or co-requisite for this class. The second half of the course assumes basic knowledge of statistical concepts.

COMM 461 (Research Seminar) must be taken for 1 credit as a co-requisite to COMM 460. COMM 461 is the lab for COMM 460 and will be devoted to group research projects.

COMM 461 MEETS IN SOCIAL SCIENCE 258

Course Objectives

- To understand the reasoning behind social and communication research.
- To learn to phrase questions so that they can be answered through research.
- To understand ethical issues in conducting research.
- To acquire a repertoire of data-gathering techniques and knowledge of how to use them appropriately.
- To learn to apply basic statistical concepts to the interpretation of data.
- To learn how to use computer software for data analysis.
- To learn how to report findings accurately and effectively.
- To become more appreciative and critical readers of research.
- To execute your own study and produce a report that provides useful information.

Sequence of Topics and Readings

Exam 1 Readings:

Foundations of social research	chapters 1, 2 (p. 32-43), 4
Research ethics	chapter 5
Measurement	chapter 6 (p. 107-121)
Questionnaire construction	chapter 8 (p.166-187)

Exam 2 Readings:

Reliability and validity	chapter 6 (p. 121-128)
Sampling	chapter 7 (p.132-140; 148-163)
Survey design	chapter 8 (p.187-200)
Qualitative research	chapter 13-14

Exam 3 Readings:

Data analysis/Statistics	chapters 7 (p. 141-147), 11, 12
Content analysis	chapter 10
Experiments	chapter 9
Exam 3	

Requirements

There will be three exams on the lectures and readings and a group project. The exams will be non-cumulative and will cover lectures and the readings in the textbook. In addition, class members will carry out a research project in small groups. Groups will present their project to the rest of the class at the end of the semester. A written report of the project is due during final exam week. An individual grade will be assigned for group project work based on the quality of the project and anonymous evaluations of your work from other group members.

You will receive a separate grade for COMM 460 and COMM 461. Grades will be will be assigned using the +/- system and will be computed based on the following formula:

COMM 460:

exam #1 = 100 points
exam #2 = 100 points
exam #3 = 100 points
group project work = 100 points

COMM 461:

group project work and attendance = 100%

Consistent and prompt attendance is essential in COMM 461 so that groups can get project work done. **Your grade will go down if you miss classes or come late.** Groups will also have one weekly out-of-class meeting to work on projects. Again, consistent and prompt attendance is essential at these meetings and will be evaluated based on group evaluations.

Dates and Deadlines

Wed., Feb. 16:	Outline of group project due
Fri., Feb. 25:	Exam #1
Wed., Mar. 9:	Full project prospectus due
Wed., Mar. 16:	Revised prospectus due (first half of report – “introduction and methods”)
Fri., Mar. 25:	Exam #2
Wed., Ap. 27:	Exam #3
Wed., May 4:	Second half of report due ("results" and "conclusions")
Fri., May 6:	Group reports begin
Mon., May 10 (10:00 a.m.):	Group reports conclude
Wed., May 12:	Full, revised report due (submit hard copy in to my mailbox in LA 301 AND electronic copy to my email address)

RESEARCH PROJECT GUIDELINES

The research project is an essential part of this course because it allows us to learn through experience. You can undertake any type of study you like (e.g., a survey, experiment or content analysis) as long as it involves some form of quantitative analysis (i.e., you have to perform some formal measurement). Please see the course web page for examples of projects completed by past students in this course.

I have in mind two types of projects, although you can propose other options.

1. Public opinion or awareness survey. Locate a non-profit organization (e.g., charity, community service organization, University group, or public agency) that needs information from the people they serve or the people within the organization. Develop and administer a survey designed to address these information needs and produce a report for their benefit. If you choose this option you will work with a representative of the organization to identify objectives for the survey and work with me to design methods that will achieve these objectives. The purpose should be gather information about the perceptions and opinions of a carefully defined population of individuals (usually either clients, potential clients, or members of the organization). This should not be confused with publicity, fundraising, membership drives, etc. where you directly promote the organization's goals. The project should assist a nonprofit agency and thereby serve the public interest. Such agencies are often appreciative of your assistance because they operate on restrictive budgets and cannot afford to commission a professional survey.
2. Replication/extension. Find an area of communication research that interests you and identify a study or set of studies that provide a useful model. Plan a new study replicating parts of the previous research but with modifications that extend or clarify the original study. The purpose of a replication is to determine whether the results of an earlier study stand up under repeated testing. Replications usually include strategic modifications to address issues raised by the earlier study or to extend the research in useful new directions. You should select a study that is interesting but fairly straightforward. I suggest that you start by generating several possible studies and then looking up the original articles that contain detailed descriptions of the research. I can help advise you about which studies involve procedures or statistics that are too complicated for our purposes (some studies can be modified and we will invariably simplify the statistical analyses). In some cases I can help you obtain the necessary research tools, such as questionnaires.

PROSPECTUS GUIDELINES

A brief outline of your project is due very early in the semester and a complete prospectus afterwards. The complete prospectus must be approved before you collect any data. The initial outline should explain the objectives of the study and the methods in brief (e.g., where/how will the data be collected). The complete prospectus should describe the objectives and methods in detail. The prospectus should read like the first section of a research report (i.e., the introduction, rationale, and methods sections, along with any appendices that include cover letters, questionnaires, etc.; see the “Guidelines for Writing Research Reports” on the course website). Treat the prospectus as your initial draft of the first half of the report that you will turn in at the end of the semester. Include the following information (item #1 falls under the “introduction” or “rationale,” the other items fall under the “methods”). With the exception of item #7 below (schedule), write the prospectus in complete sentences and paragraphs (double spaced), not in outline form.

1. Give background about the study, describe the objectives of the research, and clarify the importance of these objectives. If it is convenient, you may present your objectives in the form of a set of research questions or hypotheses.

2. The population to be sampled and the sampling procedures (consult chapter 7 on sampling in the course textbook).

3. The questionnaire or interview questions to be used in the research and accompanying materials (e.g., cover letter, instructions to respondents and interviewers). Give a general description of these items (their purpose and content) under methods; then provide a full copy of the cover letter, questionnaire, or interview schedule at the end, in an appendix.

4. Procedures for protecting the rights of research participants (consult chapter 5 in the text and the ethical guidelines listed below).

5. Any additional procedures needed to carry out the study. For example, if it is an experiment, you will need to explain the experimental design and procedures. If the study involves open-ended answers to questionnaires, you will need to explain how these answers will be analyzed.

7. Plans for sharing results with respondents by means of a written or oral summary (consult the ethical guidelines below).

6. A schedule for collecting the data and completing the study.

7. Use APA style for references and format. For assistance, consult the course web page (use the link to “Basics of APA style”). Also consult past group project reports posted on the course web page. The style must be somewhat formal to be appropriate for a research report to be read by an external audience. Do not write the prospectus or research report as a personal narrative about yourselves or the group process. Use passive voice when necessary to avoid saying “we,” “our,” etc. repeatedly. Provide details that an outsider reader would need to know in order to understand your methods.

ETHICAL GUIDELINES

1. Anonymity and confidentiality. Responses should not be recorded or reported in such a manner that the respondent can be identified. Names and equivalent identifiers should not be recorded with participant responses. Results should be reported mainly as statistical summaries. Any quotation from written comments or other reference to individual responses must not allow identification of respondents.

2. No harm to participants. The research should not present any risks to participants greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. For example, you should avoid topics that cause serious psychological discomfort and should not request information that is risky for participants to reveal.

3. Informed, voluntary participation. Before gathering any information, you must provide a concise but informative explanation of the goals and procedures of the research (e.g., what the survey is about, how long it will take, who it will benefit). Participants must also be informed that their participation is entirely voluntary and that they may withdraw their participation at any time. You should offer to answer any questions the participant has about the research. Although deception is occasionally used in social research, it is generally unnecessary in this class. However, it is sometimes necessary to withhold full disclosure about specific goals or sponsoring agencies in order to avoid biasing responses.

4. Follow-up. In most cases, you should make results from the study available to interested participants. If you are working with an organization you should provide the organization with the final written report and offer to provide an oral presentation if appropriate. If you are collecting information from individuals you should indicate how they can obtain a brief abstract summarizing the results. Any problems or complaints related to the research should be reported to me immediately.

Example

Cover letters or instructions to written questionnaires should contain a paragraph similar to the following:

"Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. Your completion and return of this questionnaire will serve as informed acceptance of participation. You may refuse to answer any specific question and may end your participation at any time. Information collected will be identified only by a number and your name will not be connected to your returned questionnaire. If you would like a summary of the results of this study..." [indicate procedure for receiving summary.]