COMM 3313: News Gathering and Investigation

CRN: 10387
Spring 2025

Room 104, Cotton Memorial Building
Tues-Thurs 3-420 p.m.

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Office hours: Tue & Thurs. 4:30 – 5:30 p.m. and virtually Weds. 10 a.m. – noon, or by appointment. I can also be reached through our course Slack channel or via text messaging.

Gannon's Personal Meeting Zoom:

https://utep-edu.zoom.us/j/9896710784?pwd=bWowWldGdW13YWVUM0c4ZDloUFVWUT09
Meeting ID: 989 671 0784
Passcode: 103774

Course Description

The rigor of in-depth investigative reporting raises "the bar for the entire profession," says Brant Houston, who served for years as the executive director of Investigative Reporters and Editors. But, investigative newsgathering techniques aren't just the exclusive territory of elite reporters working for months or years on blockbuster stories**. All journalists use the investigative process every day to improve understanding of the issues being reported on any beat.**

Sometimes called "watchdog" reporting," investigative journalism holds institutions and organizations accountable to the public they are supposed to serve. This course covers the techniques and ethical principles of news gathering for accountability reporting. Are our schools improving or declining? Is a charity using donations wisely? Is our athletic program safe? Which cars are most likely to be stolen? What are the most dangerous jobs in town?

Students will practice the fundamentals of investigative journalism: tracking down relevant primary and secondary sources, filing open records requests and conducting research and interviews. Students will also gain practical experience in data journalism techniques for inquiry and analysis that they will use for finding story ideas and reporting on public affairs. The techniques are the basis for lifelong skills that can be used for everything from investigative journalism projects to daily beat reporting and even non-journalism work of tracking data for businesses and organizations for quality control and efficiency planning.

How this Course Works

Students will work on exercises and story assignments to deepen their news gathering and investigation skills. Students will also be required to propose and develop their own data-informed stories.

This course covers the practical skills and ethical principles of in-depth newsgathering. We will learn the fundamentals of investigation: choosing topics, identifying sources, conducting research and interviews as well as organizing an investigative project. And finally, writing a balanced and compelling narrative.

Students will pitch, report, conceptualize, design and produce informative news articles that include analysis of data sets that reveal stories in the data. The goal is to produce well-sourced and researched stories as well as data visualizations that would be deemed publishable by professional media outlets.

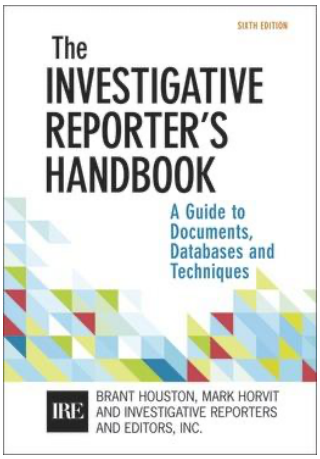
Course Objective and Expected Learning Outcomes

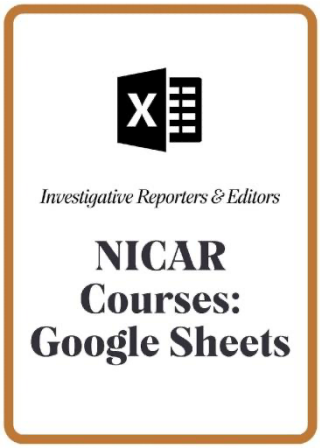
Course Objective: To master basic investigative tools and techniques, as well as know how to apply them to everyday reporting and major enterprise stories. We will explore how to take advantage of two main sources of information – documents and people – and discuss when and how to use data journalism to develop a routine story or provide the foundation for a major project. In addition, we will gain an understanding of technologies available to create online, interactive data visualizations to inform and empower communities.

At the end of this course, students should:

- Understand how and where to access important investigative documents, including using FOIA and open records requests
- Be able to use interviewing skills to obtain relevant information and context
- Be able to organize large amounts of information into a coherent news narrative
- Demonstrate knowledge of common math concepts in reporting
- Understand the ethics of investigative journalism, verification and fairness
- Be able to use spreadsheets and basic data analysis for storytelling

Required Materials





Purchase the $20 Google Sheets course pack from Investigative Reporters and Editors, National Institute of Computer Assisted Reporting (IRE-NICAR). This includes the sample data and instructions we'll be using throughout this course.
https://www.ire.org/product/nicar-courses-mac/

The Investigative Reporter's Handbook: A Guide to Documents, Databases and Techniques **6th Edition** by Brant Houston and Investigative Reporters and Editors
https://www.macmillanlearning.com/college/us/product/Investigative-Reporters-Handbook/p/1319102840

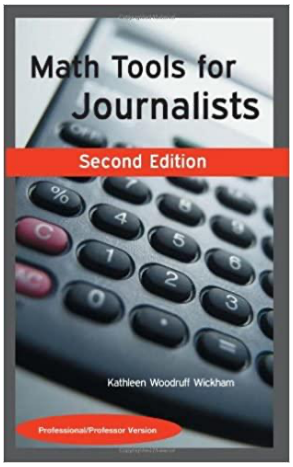
A Google Account – Free. This is to be able to do exercises in Google Sheets

Poynter News University account – Free

Other course readings will be available on Blackboard.

Regular access to a computer that can access Google Drive using web browser (not mobile app), Blackboard, Slack and your UTEP email account. I will use Blackboard to post some lessons, reference readings, evaluations, assignments, grades, announcements and other relevant information.

Recommended, not required



Math Tools for Journalists, Second Edition by Kathleen Woodruff Wickham 9780972993746 (professional/professor version with answers is fine)

Grading

Your final class grade will be the average of your scores in the following categories. Each assignment will be graded on a scale of A to F. Class participation will also be scored from A to F. Points will be deducted from your class participation score for absences.

- Participation (Attendance, in-class exercises) - 25 percent
- Quizzes - 15 percent
- Skills Assignments - 20 percent
- Data Story 1 - 15 percent
- Data Story 2 (Final project) - 25 percent

Grading Scale:

A = 90-100 An "A" grade is designated is designated for exceptional work of publishable quality without the need for further editing or reporting, deeply reported, fact-checked, original and creative, well presented and adhering to AP style.

B = 80 – 89 A "B" grade is designated for better than average work, publishable with minor changes, well reported and organized, with a few errors in editing and follows AP style.

C = 70 – 79 A "C" grade is designated for an assignment that meets requirements of the assignment, but is average work; average research, story lacks clarity, sources are insufficient, requires substantial changes, including additional reporting, significant rewriting and correction of numerous AP style errors.

D = 60 – 69 A "D" grade is designated for assignments that do not meet all requirements of the assignment; generally less than average work, less than average research, no clear angle for the story, sources are faulty, or serious flaws in reporting and writing.

F = 0 – 59 An “F” grade fails to meet most of the requirements of the assignment; far below average work, insufficient reporting and massive errors.

Participation: 25 percent

This includes attendance, class contributions, class exercises and story pitches. For example, with participation you will receive a check plus if you make positive class contributions and complete assignments satisfactorily. This is worth 10 pts. If you make an effort, but don’t complete the exercise as intended you will receive a check, which is worth 7 pts. If you are absent / don’t complete the exercise you will receive 0 pts

You will be able to make up missed or unsatisfactory assignments (but not absences) to make up points. However, you can’t earn more than the 250 points total for this category. That is, your grade for attendance and participation won’t improve your grade on your assignments or quizzes.

Assignments

There will be a number of in-class exercises that will be graded under Participation. Additional mandatory exercises expected to be completed outside of class, such as the Open Records Story, Investigative Story Report, Data Map, etc., will be averaged for a grade for Assignments.

Data Story 1

This will be a short data-driven news story. The story will demonstrate data analysis and clear explanation of an issue.

Data Story 2 – Final data story and data visualization

This final project is a journalism-style article that uses data as a way to gain some insight into a local newsworthy issue of public interest. You will work on this story throughout the semester. The final story will convey complex information in a clear and compelling manner and include at least two relevant human sources (interviews you conduct), data analysis and data visualization elements.

This project includes meeting milestones to ensure you are building the story throughout the semester. This includes an initial Story Memo, One-to-One meeting with me to discuss story progress, Story Draft, Data Visualization Draft and the final, revised story and data viz.

Attendance Policy

Attendance is determined by class participation. Students must be prepared, participate in group discussions, and complete the course modules in order to understand and incorporate the strategies and processes used to complete the projects.

ILLNESS PRECAUTIONS

Please stay home if you have symptoms of a communicable illness. If you are feeling unwell, please let us know as soon as possible, so that we can work on appropriate accommodations.

Drop Policy

Students wishing to withdraw from the course with a grade of "W" must do so before the official college deadline, **Oct. 31**.

I will not drop you from the course. However, if you feel that you are unable to complete the course successfully, please let me know and then contact the Registrar's Office to initiate the drop process. If you do not, you are at risk of receiving an "F" for the course

Scholastic Integrity

It is expected that you will research and report all of your own work and that you will know how to properly attribute sources and quote people accurately.

Academic dishonesty is prohibited and is considered a violation of the UTEP Handbook of Operating Procedures. It includes, but is not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, and collusion. Cheating may involve copying from or providing information to another student or falsifying source material. Plagiarism occurs when someone intentionally or knowingly represents the words or ideas of another as ones' own. Self-plagiarism involves "recycling" assignments from other classes or publications. Collusion involves collaborating with another person to commit any academically dishonest act. Any act of academic dishonesty attempted by a UTEP student is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. All suspected violations of academic integrity at The University of Texas at El Paso must be reported to the Office of Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution (OSCCR) for possible disciplinary action. To learn more HOOP: Student Conduct and Discipline.

Artificial Intelligence

The use of generative AI tools such as Chat GPT is permitted in this course for the following activities, which must be noted or cited:

- Generating ideas for stories, but not for writing pitches or summaries
- Research on a topic that is then verified by your fact-checking and written about in your own words based on follow up reporting
- Assistance with summarizing content from credible, verifiable sources (such as public meeting minutes). Needs to be fact-checked thoroughly. This is only for reference, not to be submitted as your own writing.
- Experimenting with creating visualizations that might be used with stories AFTER getting approval from your instructor and discussing appropriate use.

A short paragraph describing how the tool(s) was/were used for the assignment must be included.

However, you **may not use** AI tools to complete the following activities:

- Writing your stories or assignments
- Creating visualizations without prior instructor approval

Students must cite any borrowed content sources to comply with all applicable citation guidelines, copyright law, and avoid plagiarism. Instances that violate these guidelines will be referred to the Office of Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution.

Grade grievance: Formal grade appeals may be submitted to the Faculty Senate's Grievance Committee. Criteria and form can be found at this link.

Accommodations Policy: The University is committed to providing reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities. Students who become pregnant may also request reasonable accommodations, in accordance with state and federal laws and regulations and University policy. Accommodations that constitute undue hardship are not reasonable. To make a request, please register with the UTEP Center for Accommodations and Support Services (CASS). Contact CASS at 915-747-5148, email them at cass@utep.edu, or apply for accommodations online via the CASS portal.

Student Resources

UTEP provides a variety of student services and support:

- UTEP Library: Access a wide range of resources including online, full-text access to thousands of journals and eBooks plus reference service and librarian assistance for enrolled students.
- Help Desk: Students experiencing technological challenges (email, Blackboard, software, etc.) can submit a ticket to the UTEP Helpdesk for assistance. Contact the Helpdesk via phone, email, chat, website, or in person if on campus.
- University Writing Center (UWC): Submit papers here for assistance with writing style and formatting, ask a tutor for help and explore other writing resources.
- Online AP Stylebook and AP Writing lab: Link and instructions on how to use the UTEP VPN to access the Associated Press Stylebook online free.
- Military Student Success Center: UTEP welcomes military-affiliated students to its degree programs, and the Military Student Success Center and its dedicated staff (many of whom are veterans and students themselves) are here to help personnel in any branch of service to reach their educational goals.
- A Miners Guide: Help with Time Management, Stress
- UTEP Counseling Services: Including hotline helpline