

Course Title: **Research Literacy for Media Practitioners**

Course Number: MEJO 790.2

Instructor: Prof. Deen Freelon, Ph.D.

Time: W 230 pm – 515 pm

Room: Carroll 340A

Office hours: M 230 - 5 and by appt

My office: Carroll 380

My email: freelon@email.unc.edu

Course website: <https://sakai.unc.edu/portal/site/mejo790.002.sp19>

Course introduction

Research is one of the primary goals of the best universities, and one to which they commit billions of dollars annually. Yet most graduates of this university and most others will not go on to conduct formal research as one of their primary employment duties. That said, understanding what research is, how it is conducted, and the basics of how to critique it are important skills in many media-centric jobs, even if they aren't listed in the job description. The purpose of this course is to introduce you to those research skills that are most useful for non-researchers. Its central premise is that whatever media-centric job you end up taking, you'll find these skills valuable from time to time. Whether it's knowing the right questions to ask about research studies, evaluating expert sources, or sniffing out deceptive messages, my goal is to show you how research literacy can help you be a better media practitioner (or professional, if you prefer).

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- Identify the major types of research as well as their goals and associated research methods
- Extract key pieces of information from scientific papers
- Ask critical questions of a research study that may reveal flaws in the study design
- Explain who counts as an “expert” and why
- Identify attempts to deceive and manipulate media audiences with false expertise
- Identify and critique major research data sources
- Identify common techniques of statistical deception

Summary of course requirements

- Attend and participate in all class meetings – 10%
- Discussion leadership - 10%

- News/research study critique - 20%
- Expert analysis- 25%
- Issue coverage analysis- 35%

Course plan

This course is divided into three main units (listed below in order):

1. Understanding research
2. Authority, expertise, and deception
3. From data to stories

The first unit is devoted to understanding what research is, its various types, how to read it, and how we can tell when it is conducted well vs. poorly. The second unit focuses on the nature of authority and expertise: where they come from, when they are valid and invalid, how people and organizations try to fabricate them, and how they shape our beliefs about what is true and false. The third unit puts the lessons of the first two into practice by exploring the valid and bad ways in which data are organized to support storytelling.

Grade key

91-100%	H
81-90%	P
71-80%	L
< 70%	F

Required materials

There are four books required for this course, all of which you should purchase ASAP:

Huff, D. (2010). *How to Lie with Statistics* (Reissue edition). W. W. Norton & Company.

Nichols, T. (2017). *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters*. Oxford University Press.

Oreskes, N., & Conway, E. M. (2010). *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. Bloomsbury Press.

Ragin, C. C., & Amoroso, L. M. (2018). *Constructing Social Research: The Unity and Diversity of Method*. SAGE Publications, Inc.

Additional course readings are available on the course Sakai site through the “Course Reserves” link. Please read all assigned readings before the date on which they are listed and come to class prepared to discuss them.

Assignments

This course has five graded assignments:

Assignment	Description	% Grade	Due date
Class participation	Students are expected to attend and actively participate in each class session. This will mostly mean speaking up during seminar discussions, but also includes other in-class activities we will occasionally undertake.	10	None
Discussion leadership	During the first week of class, each student will sign up to be a discussion leader for one class day. Discussion leadership entails generating a list of questions based on the readings for that day and presenting them to the class for discussion--essentially creating a class agenda and ensuring that the students remain engaged for at least 90 minutes. I encourage each discussion leader to apply the course readings to themes or topics they are interested in. During each discussion leadership session, I will play the role of moderator, responding to and sometimes reframing the questions to help the discussion on a useful track.	10	Variable
News/research study critique	For this written assignment, you will identify a research study that has been covered in the media within the past two years. (Articles on the syllabus do not count.) You will read the study itself as well as one news article of at least 500 words that is primarily devoted to covering the study. Your paper will be a critique of how effectively and accurately the news article covered the study, and should include the	20	Sun, Feb 3 by 11:59pm

	<p>following elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A brief description of the study, including its overall purpose, method(s) used, findings, and overall significance. ● A brief description of the news article, including the aspects of the study presented as most important (i.e. in the headline and lead paragraph), and any aspects that were omitted or minimized. You should also analyze any language choices that deviate from the language used by the study author(s) that might influence how readers interpret the study. ● An evaluation of the accuracy of the article's coverage, including whether the article made any claims not supported by the study, whether it emphasized the same findings the study authors did, and whether it left out anything that it should have included. ● A detailed discussion of how the article could be rewritten to summarize the study more accurately. This might include reorganizing it to place certain information closer to the beginning, using different (possibly less sensational?) language, explaining how the study fits with the broader literature on the topic, and/or explaining the study's key methodological limitations. ● You should be able to accomplish all this in 1200 - 1500 words. Microsoft Word or Google Docs format please. ● Include the original study and news article in your assignment submission. 		
Expert analysis	<p>For this assignment you will start by identifying an individual or organization (entity) that is frequently cited in the mainstream news media as an expert on a given topic. Then you will write a paper containing the following elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A brief, <i>original</i> profile of the entity, including citations (Wikipedia may not be used as a source) ● Evidence that the entity is mentioned frequently by a broad range of media outlets (you can get this from Lexis Nexis or Factiva, 	25	Sun, Mar 3 by 11:59pm

	<p>which we will discuss in class)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Using readings from the course and outside it, discuss the entity's strengths and weaknesses as an expert. ● Finally, suggest a second expert who would be a better choice (if the entity's weaknesses outweigh its strengths) or who would provide an appropriate alternative viewpoint (if the opposite is true). Justify your choice. ● You should be able to accomplish all this in 1300 - 1600 words. Microsoft Word or Google Docs format please. 		
Issue coverage analysis	<p>Briefly, this assignment will require you to analyze how news coverage of a particular issue uses sources and academic research. You'll start by choosing an issue that's been prominent in the US news media during the past two years. You'll then select at least 50 articles covering your issue for analysis (I'll show you the best way to do this). You'll work with a classmate to extract the following information from each article:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Every quoted individual and organization/institution (including anonymous sources) ● Every research study referenced along with the methods and data used ● Evidence of possible deception or manipulation, as well as how the journalist tries to address it (when applicable) <p>To clarify, every student will write a paper about their own chosen topic, but every student will analyze data for two projects: their own and their partner's. The idea is to have every issue dataset analyzed twice to get some level of agreement on the prevalence of each data point.</p> <p>Your paper should include the following elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A summary of your findings (e.g. the most cited sources, studies, and any attempts at deception) ● An analysis of the quality of news coverage of this issue, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Source diversity (are there many 	35	Tue, May 7 by 8am

	<p>sources representing many interests, or the same few sources again and again?)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Research representation (are the cited research studies represented accurately or distorted to grab attention?) ○ Susceptibility to deceptive tactics (how much evidence is there of attempts by sources to spread lies or misinfo on this issue? How effectively do your news articles handle these attempts?) ○ One more quality issue of your own choice that came up in your reading of the articles <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A set of recommendations for how to improve news coverage of this issue. This should focus on how to rectify the major shortcomings identified in the previous sections and build upon existing strengths. Also discuss any challenges that might make your recommendations difficult to implement. ● This paper should run between 2000 and 2500 words, not including tables, charts, and references. Microsoft Word or Google Docs format please. You will also present your findings to the class during our final exam period. ● Please cite all outside sources. 		
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My classroom expectations

In this class, I expect that you will:

- Come to class prepared to engage with the day's material
- Come to class on time
- Complete all assignments on time
- Silence your mobile phone during class
- Not waste class time on electronic or online services unrelated to class.
- Speak up regularly and relevantly
- Let me know if and when you're having trouble understanding anything (feel free to do so publicly or privately)
- Not insult or belittle me or your fellow classmates
- Refrain from plagiarism and other violations of UNC's Honor Code (see below)

Additionally, given recent events, I feel it is important to clarify the bounds of class conduct and discussion in advance to reduce confusion about what is permitted and what is not. I undertake

this task in the spirit of one of every university's main purposes: to distinguish between valid and invalid knowledge and judgments. Therefore, over and above UNC's official diversity statement (reproduced below), I hereby establish the following bounds of classroom conduct. All students in this class will:

- Refrain from judging individuals according to the collective groups of which they are members (e.g. race, gender, class, sexual orientation, disability status, etc.);
- Assess intellectual ideas and arguments strictly according to the evidence supporting them, and not based on the identities of the individual who created them;
- Acknowledge that due to historical and contemporary systems of oppression, allegations of racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, etc. are not symmetrical between social groups. This means such claims can only be valid when advanced by members of a less powerful group against a more powerful group. Allegations in the opposite direction (e.g. of "reverse racism") will not be tolerated. Such notions have been definitively debunked by many strong arguments for which I am happy to provide references upon request.

By the same token, you can expect that I will:

- Come to class prepared and enthused to engage with the day's material
- Treat your personal views with respect
- Carefully explain any concepts that don't make sense
- Cultivate a civil and welcoming class environment
- Return your graded assignments within about a week
- Reward good-faith efforts to engage with course material
- Refer plagiarism and other violations of UNC's Honor Code to the proper authorities (see below)

My policies

- *Lateness and absences:* Please arrive promptly for class; lateness is disruptive and inconsiderate. Chronic lateness will count against your grade.
- *Late assignments:* Turning in your assignments on time will be absolutely critical in this class. Otherwise you will fall behind, which will jeopardize your ability to complete the final assignment. So please keep current with these.
- *Mobile phones:* These should not be used during class under any circumstances, and your ringer should be set to silent.
- *Bathroom:* Feel free to use the bathroom whenever you need to; just leave and re-enter as quietly as possible.

University Policies

The Honor Code

It is my duty to report any and all suspected Honor Code violations to the Student Attorney General. If you are not familiar with the Honor Code, please review it at <http://instrument.unc.edu> . As stated in the Honor Code, “It shall be the responsibility of every student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to obey and support the enforcement of the Honor Code, which prohibits lying, cheating, or stealing when these actions involve academic process or University student or academic personnel acting in an official capacity.”

A special note about plagiarism: The Instrument of Student Governance at UNC defines plagiarism as “deliberate or reckless representation of another’s words, thoughts, or ideas as one’s own without attribution in connection with submission of academic work, whether graded or otherwise.” Copying-and-pasting from online sources without citing the source from which you obtained the content is clearly an instance of plagiarism. However, it may also be plagiarism if you rely too heavily on the structure and reasoning of another piece (for example, if you rely too much on swapping out synonyms or making only very superficial changes to content that is not yours). This type of extensive paraphrasing is not acceptable in this course, which requires you to demonstrate original thinking and analysis. If you have any questions about whether your use of reference material is appropriate, please see me. If any part of your work is judged by me and an independent faculty member to reflect inappropriate use of reference material, I reserve the right to adjust assignment and course grades downwards, in addition to reporting suspected violations as described in the preceding paragraph.

Students with Disabilities

If you have a diagnosed or suspected disability that you think might affect your performance in this course, you should contact Accessibility Resources & Service to determine whether and to what extent services or accommodations are available. If you think this might apply to you, please contact Accessibility Resources & Service at 962-8300 or visit the department’s Website at <https://accessibility.unc.edu/> . Please understand that I’m not qualified or permitted under University policies to provide any disability-related accommodations without authorization from ARS.

Diversity

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is committed to equality of educational opportunity. The University does not discriminate in offering access to its educational programs and activities on the basis of age, gender, race, color, national origin, religion, creed, disability, veteran’s status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. The Dean of Students (Suite 1106, Student Academic Services Building, CB# 5100, 450 Ridge Road, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-5100 or [919] 966-4042) has been designated to handle inquiries regarding the University’s nondiscrimination policies.

Course reading schedule

<i>Date</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Readings</i>	<i>Assignment due</i>
1/9	What is research (literacy)?	Ragin ch 1	

		Dow & Sutton https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Research_arch Shapiro & Hughes	
1/16	How to read a research paper	McGregor ch 1 Ragin chs 2 and 3 Elysium Health Keshav Broniatowski et al	
1/23	Understanding quantitative research	Ragin ch 7 TBA	
1/30	Understanding qualitative research	Ragin ch 5 TBA	News/research study critique due Sun, 2/3 @ 11:59pm
2/6	Understanding digital research	Jungherr, "Normalizing Digital Trace Data" Freelon, "Inferring individual-level characteristics from digital trace data" TBA	
2/13	What is authority? Humans and institutions	Nichols chs 1, 2 TBA	
2/20	What is authority? Tech and media overload	Nichols chs 4, 5 TBA	
2/27	Liars and their tactics 1	Oreskes chs 1, 2 Nichols ch 6 TBA	Expert analysis due Sun, 3/3 @ 11:59pm
3/6	Liars and their tactics 2	Oreskes chs 3, 4 TBA	
3/20	Who gets to be an expert? On morality and expertise	Oreskes chs 5, 6 TBA	
3/27	Stats and stories 1	Huff chs 1, 2 TBA	
4/3	Stats and stories 2	Huff chs 3, 4 TBA	
4/10	Visualization best practices 1	Huff chs 5, 6 TBA	
4/17	Visualization best practices 2	Huff chs 7, 8 TBA	
4/24	From data to stories	Huff chs 9, 10 TBA	
5/7	Final presentations	(none)	Issue coverage analysis due Tue, 5/7 by 8am . The exam period is 8am - 11am .