

MEJO 756 Investigative Data-driven Reporting

Fall 2023

MW 2-3:15 p.m., CA 142

Instructor: Ryan Thornburg Office: CA 215

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Course Overview

An introduction to basic statistics and numerical and mathematical literacy, as well as a look at professional data-driven journalism projects.

Course Goals

By the end of this course, you will be able to

- identify and critique the use of data in news stories
- find and acquire newsworthy data sets
- evaluate data sets for errors and omissions
- clean and organize data
- "interview" data using the R programming language for statistical computing
- create data visualizations that highlight newsworthy elements of a data set
- use data to find and write news stories for a general audience

Required Materials

Textbooks

- Readings as assigned on Canvas
- Readings on digital reserve

Subscriptions

- [DataCamp.com](https://datacamp.com) (free during the semester; must use unc.edu address)
- [IRE.org](https://ire.org) (\$25 student membership)

Hardware

- You should have a clean, working laptop that meets CCI specifications. I recommend 8GB RAM and 256 GB SSD drive if possible. Your operating system must be Windows 11 or later or Mac OSX 12 or later.
- The School recommends—but doesn't require—a laptop such as the Macbook Air 13. Students planning to pursue advanced MJ-school courses with intensive video editing, motion graphics, animation, 3D modeling, etc, should consider a more powerful computer such as a Macbook Pro 13" with Touch Bar and Touch ID.

Software

- You will need to [install R and R Studio on your computer](#)
- You will need to [download](#) and [install](#) OpenRefine on your computer
- You will need to [sign up for a student account at GitHub](#) if you do not already have one
- I support the Firefox browser. If you use Chrome or Safari, you need to understand how to download and open files on your computer

University Attendance Policy

No right or privilege exists that permits a student to be absent from any class meetings, except for these University Approved Absences:

1. Authorized University activities
2. Disability/religious observance/pregnancy, as required by law and approved by [Accessibility Resources and Service](#) and/or the [Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office](#) (EOC)
3. Significant health condition and/or personal/family emergency as approved by the [Office of the Dean of Students](#), [Gender Violence Service Coordinators](#), and/or the [Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office](#) (EOC).

Late Work: Why I don't accept it

In previous semesters I've accepted late work with a 10% penalty. However, I found that I no longer have time to grade all the late work in a timely fashion and that each semester I have one or more students who asked me to grade and give credit for work they submitted far after final grades had been submitted. Therefore:

- Assignments submitted after the deadline but before the final day of classes will be marked as complete and given half credit.
- If you would like substantive feedback from me on a late assignment you hand in during the semester, please make an office hours appointment with me.
- Class assignments not submitted by 11:59 p.m. ET on the day of our final class meeting will receive a 0.
- Final assignments not submitted by the deadline for that assignment may result in [a temporary course grade of "AB"](#).
- I will accept late final assignments until 72 hours before the last day of final exams for the next semester.
- Temporary "AB" grades will convert to permanent "F*" grades on the last day of final exams for the next semester. I will not accept or work or request any course grade changes after the last day of final exams for the next semester.

Determination of Grade

Attendance	10% of the course grade
Reading Questions	15%
In-class Labs	15%
DataCamp skills courses	15%
Final	45%

Grading Scale

Percentages will be converted to letter grades according to the following scale.

Letter Grade	Percentage
H	94–100%
P	80-93%
L	70–79%
F	0–70%

HONOR CODE:

I expect that each student will conduct himself or herself within the guidelines of the University honor system (<http://honor.unc.edu>). All academic work should be done with the high levels of honesty and integrity that this University demands. You are expected to produce your own work in this class. If you have any questions about your responsibility or your instructor's responsibility as a faculty member under the Honor Code, please see the course instructor or Associate Dean Julie Dixon-Green or you may speak with a representative of the Student Attorney Office or the Office of the Dean of Students.

SYLLABUS CHANGES

The professor reserves the right to make changes to the syllabus, including project due dates and test dates. These changes will be announced as early as possible.

ARS

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill facilitates the implementation of reasonable accommodations, including resources and services, for students with disabilities, chronic medical conditions, a temporary disability or pregnancy complications resulting in barriers to fully accessing University courses, programs and activities. Accommodations are determined through the Office of Accessibility Resources and Service (ARS) for individuals with documented qualifying disabilities in accordance with applicable state and federal laws. See the ARS Website for contact

information: <https://ars.unc.edu> or email ars@unc.edu.

(source:

<https://ars.unc.edu/faculty-staff/syllabus-statement>)

COUNSELING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES

CAPS is strongly committed to addressing the mental health needs of a diverse student body through timely access to consultation and connection to clinically appropriate services, whether for short or long-term needs. Go to their website: <https://caps.unc.edu/> or visit their facilities on the third floor of the Campus Health Services building for a walk-in evaluation to learn more.

TITLE IX

Any student who is impacted by discrimination, harassment, interpersonal (relationship) violence, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, or stalking is encouraged to seek resources on campus or in the community. Reports can be made online to the EOC at

<https://eoc.unc.edu/report-an-incident/>. Please contact the University's Title IX Coordinator (Elizabeth Hall, interim – titleixcoordinator@unc.edu), Report and Response Coordinators in the Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office (reportandresponse@unc.edu), Counseling and Psychological Services (confidential), or the Gender Violence Services Coordinators (gvsc@unc.edu; confidential) to discuss your specific needs. Additional resources are available at safe.unc.edu.

POLICY ON NON-DISCRIMINATION

The University is committed to providing an inclusive and welcoming environment for all members of our community and to ensuring that educational and employment decisions are based on individuals' abilities and qualifications. Consistent with this principle and applicable laws, the University's [Policy Statement on Non-Discrimination](#) offers access to its educational programs and activities as well

as employment terms and conditions without respect to race, color, gender, national origin, age, religion, creed, genetic information, disability, veteran's status, sexual orientation, gender

identity or gender expression. Such a policy ensures that only relevant factors are considered and that equitable and consistent standards of conduct and performance are applied. If you are experiencing harassment or discrimination, you can seek assistance and file a report through the Report and Response Coordinators (see contact info at safe.unc.edu) or the [Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office](#), or online to the EOC at <https://eoc.unc.edu/report-an-incident/>.

DIVERSITY

I strive to make this classroom an inclusive space for all students. Please let me know if there is anything I can do to improve; I appreciate any suggestions. More broadly, our school has adopted diversity and inclusion [mission and vision statements](#) with accompanying goals. These complement the University policy on [prohibiting harassment and discrimination](#). In summary, UNC is committed to providing an inclusive and welcoming environment for all members of our community and 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.

ACCREDITATION:

The School of Journalism and Media's accrediting body outlines a number of values you should be aware of and competencies you should be able to demonstrate by the time you graduate from our program. Learn more about them here:

<http://www2.ku.edu/~acejmc/PROGRAM/PRINCIPLES.SHTML#vals&comps>

No single course could possibly give you all of these values and competencies; but collectively, our classes are designed to build your abilities in each of these areas. In this class, we will address a number of the values and competencies, with special emphasis on the last six bullet dots under "Professional values and competencies" in the link above.

NOTE: Always be professional in your dealings with your fellow workers and the people you meet as you gather news. News directors and editors say they want people with good attitudes as well as solid journalism skills.