

MEJO 570 Data-Driven Journalism

Spring 2024

TR 12:30-1:45 p.m., Curtis Media Center Rm. 302

Instructor: Ryan Thornburg Office: CA 215

Email: ryan.thornburg@unc.edu

Office hours: <https://calendly.com/rtburg/office-hours>

Course Overview

This course is an introduction to basic statistics and numerical and mathematical literacy, as well as a look at professional data-driven journalism projects. By the end of the semester, you will be able to acquire, organize, analyze, and present data to a general news audience.

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 (free during the semester; must use unc.edu address)
- [IRE.org](https://www.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.

Software

- You will need to install R and R Studio on your computer (Instructions at "Set Up Your Computer: R & RStudio" page on Canvas)
- 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

I accepted late work with a 10% penalty in previous semesters. However, I found that I no longer have time to promptly grade all the late work. Students asked me to grade and give credit for work they submitted far after I submitted the final grades. Therefore:

- Assignments that students submit 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 work or request any course grade changes after the last day of final exams for the next semester.

Determination of Grade

The course grade will be given as a percentage of about 2,400 points on various assignments distributed roughly equally across three units.

Attendance will be roughly 10% of each unit's grade.

- Unit 1: Introduction (Jan. 11 - Feb. 8)
- Unit 2: Analysis & Visualization (Feb. 20 - March 21)
- Unit 3: Acquiring & Cleaning Data (April 2 - May 6)

Grading Scale

Percentages will be converted to letter grades according to the following scale. I do not round final grades.

Letter Grade	Percentage	Meaning
A	94 to 100%	Excellent: Far exceeds standard
A-	90 to < 94%	
B+	87 to < 90%	Good: Exceeds standard
B	84 to < 87%	
B-	80 to < 84%	
C+	77 to < 80%	Fair: Meets standard
C	74 to < 77%	
C-	70 to < 74%	
D+	67 to < 70%	Poor: Shows growth but falls below standard
D	64 to < 67%	
D-	61 to < 64%	
F	0 to < 61%	Failing: Deficient

Grades below a 73% will not count for the minimum number of media and journalism credits required for graduation; the course must be retaken if it is required for the major.

HONOR CODE:

All students are expected to follow the guidelines of the UNC honor code. In particular, students are expected to refrain from “lying, cheating, or stealing” in the academic context. If you are unsure about which actions violate that honor code, please consult honor.unc.edu.

Use of generative AI tools is permitted in this course. You are responsible for accepting any AI generated suggestions that appears in your final work. Be prepared to explain the choices you’ve made in your writing.

SYLLABUS CHANGES

The instructor 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

Accessibility Resources and Service (ARS – ars@unc.edu) receives requests for accommodations, and through the Student and Applicant Accommodations Policy determines eligibility and identifies reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities and/or chronic medical conditions to mitigate or remove the barriers experienced in accessing University courses, programs and activities.

ARS also offers its Testing Center resources to students and instructors to facilitate the implementation of testing accommodations.

COUNSELING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES

UNC-Chapel Hill is strongly committed to addressing the mental health needs of a diverse student body. The [Heels Care Network](https://heelscarenetwork.com) website is a place to access the many mental health resources at Carolina. CAPS is the primary mental health provider for students, offering timely access to consultation and connection to clinically appropriate services. Go to their website <https://caps.unc.edu/> or visit their facilities on the third floor of the Campus Health building for an initial evaluation to learn more. Students can also call CAPS 24/7 at 919-966-3658 for immediate assistance.

TITLE IX AND RELATED RESOURCES

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/> or by contacting the University’s Title IX Coordinator (Elizabeth Hall, titleixcoordinator@unc.edu) or the Report and Response Coordinators in the Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office (reportandresponse@unc.edu). Confidential resources include Counseling and Psychological Services and the Gender Violence Services Coordinators (gvsc@unc.edu). 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, 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 (email reportandresponse@unc.edu or see additional contact info at safe.unc.edu) or the Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office 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](#).

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.

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.