

Computer-Assisted Information Gathering

JOUR 40101
138 Sid W. Richardson
Spring 2008
Tuesday 7:30-8:50 p.m.

Instructor: Jennifer LaFleur or jlafleur@dallasnews.com or j.lafleur@tcu.edu (I check the dallasnews address more frequently – so use that if it's urgent, or call.)
214-977-8509 (office); 314-550-3255 (cell)

Office hours: I am available by phone and email and will be happy to meet with you. It's best for me to meet before class.

Required Texts: Brant Houston, *Computer-Assisted Reporting: A Practical Guide*, third edition.

Catalogue description: Using computers to gather and analyze information for news stories. Includes on-line search techniques and database analysis.

Course description:

This course introduces you to the techniques of computer-assisted reporting. Building upon your basic reporting and critical thinking skills, the course will show you how to use the computer as a tool in news gathering and data analysis. You will learn how to find and critically evaluate information from the Internet. You will review statistics and mathematical relationships, such as percentage change, and analyze data using a spreadsheet. You will download data from the Web and analyze it. And you will learn how to use database managers to extract the information that you need from hundreds, or thousands, of computer records.

What you'll do:

- * You will learn how to use electronic spreadsheets and database managers to analyze data stored in electronic form.
- * You will learn how to obtain these electronic records from government agencies and other sources, and you may undertake a data acquisition project.
- * You will learn how to locate and download useful databases available on the Internet.
- * You will learn basic approaches to finding patterns, promising leads and stories in a database.
- * You will understand how, despite advances in computer technology, the fundamentals of basic reporting still apply. These include a devotion to accuracy, clarity, fairness, solid news value and, ultimately, good storytelling.

Once this course is over, the data skills may slip away if you do not use them. But even if that happens, I expect you to carry two things with you. One is an understanding of the potential for computer-assisted reporting in your work. The

other is a mindset. I hope you will, as a matter of habit, ask the people you encounter in your reporting not just what they know, but how they know it, and ask to see the evidence.

What you'll do:

1) Quizzes

From time to time we will have in-class quizzes testing your ability to do the types of tasks we've been learning.

NOTE: I RESERVE THE RIGHT TO ADD QUIZZES AND IN-CLASS WORK AT ANY TIME, WHETHER IT'S ON THE SYLLABUS OR NOT.

2) Homework

You will have homework assignments involving getting data on the Internet and/or from government agencies, working with data, and other things that make sense as the semester proceeds.

3) Final Exam

There will be a final exam on which you'll show me that you understand what we've learned.

Your overall responsibilities:

- Attend class. You will not be allowed to make up assignments, quizzes or exams unless you have a documented emergency. We only meet once a week, for a little over an hour. That's not a major time commitment.
- Be punctual. If you're late and you miss a quiz, you won't be allowed to make it up unless you have spoken with me in advance to explain the situation.
- Keep copies of your work on paper and/or on a computer disk or thumb drive.
- Turn off your cell phones and pagers before class begins.
- Meet your deadlines. Just like in the real world, work is due when it's due. Late work will not be accepted without a doctor's explanation or without your having contacted me in advance with an excuse that I accept.
- Follow the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics (http://www.spj.org/ethics_code.asp).

Calculating your grade

Although I reserve the right to curve, here's how your grade will be determined:

Quizzes	40 percent
Out of class work	25 percent
Class Participation	10 percent
Final	25 percent

A (90-100) B (80-89.9) C (70-79.9) D (60-69.9) F (0-59.9)

Diversity statement

The Schieffer School of Journalism recognizes the diversity of American life and that mass communication professionals must work comfortably and effectively in that society, as well as in an interdependent global community. This course will examine the implications of this need for a professionally diverse orientation in the field of journalism.

Senior portfolio

All students in each journalism sequence must present a portfolio of their work before they can be cleared for graduation. That portfolio will include evidence of your learning and samples of your work. During the semester, I will discuss ways in which you can use work completed in this class in your portfolio. In the meantime, save every story you have published to show me at the end of the semester. If you have questions about the portfolio or work that can be included from this class, please ask me.

Academic honesty

Honesty has a special meaning for journalists because our credibility depends upon truthfulness in communication with thousands of people each day. In addition, according to Section 3.4 of the TCU Student Handbook, any act that violates the academic integrity of the institution is considered academic misconduct. The procedures used to resolve suspected acts of academic misconduct are available in the offices of academic deans and the Office of Campus Life. Specific examples include but are not limited to:

- Cheating: copying from another student's test paper, laboratory report, other report, or computer files and listings; using, during any academic exercise, material and/or devices not authorized by the person in charge of the test; collaborating with or seeking aid from another student during a test or laboratory without permission; knowingly using, buying, selling, stealing, transporting, or soliciting in its entirety or in part, the contents of a test or other assignment unauthorized for release;
- Plagiarism: the appropriation, theft, purchase or obtaining by any means of another's work, and the unacknowledged submission or incorporation of that work as one's own offered for credit. Appropriation includes the quoting or paraphrasing of another's work without giving credit therefore.

- Collusion: The unauthorized collaboration with another in preparing work offered for credit.

Here are additional guidelines for this course: You may not fabricate stories or any part of stories written for this course. For example, don't make up sources, interviews or facts. Information you take from other sources, such as a Web site, a wire service, a government document or another publication, including the Skiff or a news release, must be appropriately cited. If you have questions about what constitutes fabrication or plagiarism, see me. *The penalty for fabrication or plagiarism will be an F in the course.* Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated.

Americans with Disabilities Act

TCU complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 regarding students with disabilities. Eligible students seeking accommodations should contact the coordinator for students with disabilities in the Center for Academic Services, 11 Sadler Hall. Accommodations are not retroactive. Therefore, students should contact the coordinator as soon as possible in the term for which they are seeking accommodations. More information can be obtained from the Center for Academic Services, TCU Box 297710, Fort Worth, TX 76129, or at (817) 257-7486.

Schedule of classes

The following schedule is tentative and subject to change. Most writing and homework assignments will be made in class. The reading assignments are part of your homework and should be completed *before* the next class.

Week 1

Jan. 15

Introduction to the class and some of the basic concepts of computer-assisted reporting.

Home assignment: Be ready to discuss a story on ExtraExtra
Read Chapters 1 and 2

Week 2

Jan. 22

Stories discussion/Intro to spreadsheets

Read Chapters 3 and 4

Week 3

Jan. 29

More spreadsheets

Week 4 Feb. 5	Quiz 1 Home assignment: Your own spreadsheet
Week 5 Feb. 12	Advanced Excel tools: filters, pivot tables and more Read Chapters 5 and 6
Week 6 Feb. 19	Intro to databases with Microsoft Access Read Chapter 7
Week 7 Feb. 26	Getting databases – where to find them and how to ask for them Database practice, if time Home assignment: Your own request
Week 8 March 4	Guest speakers – online backgrounding
Week 9 March 11	SPRING BREAK
Week 10 March 18	Database review and some new tools – grouping and summarizing
Week 11 March 25	Quiz 2 Read Chapter 8
Week 12 April 1	Building your own Database

Read Chapter 9
Home Assignment: DB questions

Week 13
April 8

Bulletproofing and integrity checking your data

Home assignment: DB problems

Week 14
April 15

Quiz 3

Read Chapter 10

Week 15
April 22

Bringing it all together – spreadsheets and databases and stories

Week 16
April 29

Review

FINAL: May 6