

JCOM 6040—Research Methods—Spring 2006

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Office hours:
Tuesdays, 2:30 to 4:30 p.m.
Thursdays, 10:30 a.m. to noon
Other times by appointment

Class meeting times and location:
Tuesdays, 5 to 7:30 p.m., Animal Science 312

Required text:
Mass Media Research: An Introduction, eighth edition (2006), by Roger D. Wimmer and Joseph R. Dominick

Course Description

JCOM 6040 is about thinking—thinking about research. The course is intended to help you develop a better understanding of the research process, from coming up with useful research questions to designing and conducting research to analyzing your findings and suggesting implications.

Topics will include:

- * Developing workable, defensible research questions.
- * Identifying and dealing with “globby” concepts.
- * Operationalizing concepts.
- * Deciding how to measure variables.
- * Assessing measures’ validity and reliability.
- * Choosing research tools most appropriate for your research question. (We will cover a number of methods used by social scientists.)
- * Analyzing and presenting your findings.

In addition to reading a research methods text, you will read and analyze the work of other researchers. You will develop research questions, design a study, carry out a feasibility test, and report your results. Through this project, you will have an opportunity to dig into a question of interest to you and think about the research methods most suitable for answering that question. Some of you should be able to use the course to advance your thesis or project work, while others may use it to begin work on a conference paper.

I’ll employ a variety of approaches to help us meet our objectives for the course. Class time will be devoted to discussion, lecture, and in-class exercises. Everyone has something valuable to contribute. For the sake of your education—and for the edification of your colleagues—please read the assigned chapters, think about the material, and come to class ready to ask questions and discuss.

Grading

Your grade will be based on how many of 200 total points you earn on assignments. I reserve the right to lower that grade if you are absent more than once, if you are late or leave early several times, or if you attend class but do not participate. I offer two reasons for this policy. First, if you miss class (or attend class physically but not mentally), you miss important material you’ll need for assignments, for your JCOM 6040 general exam question, and potentially for your thesis or project. By keeping track of attendance and participation, I hope to give you the incentive you need to become engaged in JCOM 6040. Second, the dynamics of small classes are such that everyone is affected when one member is absent or

attends but chooses not to participate. Your participation matters to all of us.

Ungraded assignments

We will begin the semester with two ungraded assignments—a statement of your area of interest and a signaled stopping exercise. I will note whether you did the assignments well and on time and will include this information when I evaluate whether you participated in class.

Graded assignments (200 points)

Following are the graded assignments and the number of points each is worth.

- 1.) Conceptual term (definitional fragments) assignment—5 points.
- 2.) Statement of your research question/s—15 points.
- 3.) Conceptualization of your research problem—20 points.
- 4.) Specification of relevant observations (operationalization)—25 points.
- 5.) Development of study design—25 points.
- 6.) Design of feasibility test—25 points.
- 7.) Statement of the results of a feasibility test (final paper)—85 points.

Assignment deadlines are firm. Late work will not be accepted for credit. If you e-mail an assignment to me and it does not come through on time, you receive an F.

Points-to-letter-grade translation

A = 187 – 200 (93.5% or higher)	C = 145 – 151 (72.5-75.5%)
A- = 180 – 186 (90.0-93.0%)	C- = 138 – 144 (69.0-72.0%)
B+ = 173 – 179 (86.5-89.5%)	D+ = 131 – 137 (65.5-68.5%)
B = 166 – 172 (83.0-86.0%)	D = 124 – 130 (62.0-65.0%)
B- = 159 – 165 (79.5-82.5%)	F = 0 – 123 (61.5% and below)
C+ = 152 – 158 (76.0-79.0%)	

Academic Honesty

I approach every class with the expectation that we all share a commitment to high standards of academic honesty. I will not tolerate breaches of those standards. For specific information on the University's policy on academic honesty, see the *General Catalog* or the *Code of Policies and Procedures for Students at Utah State University*. In brief, the policy states that cheating, falsification, or plagiarism can result in a warning, a grade reduction, probation, suspension, expulsion, withholding of transcripts or degrees, removal from a class, referral to appropriate counseling, or other disciplinary actions the University judiciary deems appropriate.

The JCOM Department has a zero-tolerance policy for plagiarism. Any form of academic dishonesty—including plagiarism—will result in an automatic F for the course and a report to the dean of the College. JCOM majors who engage in proven academic dishonesty may be dropped from the major. Students who hand in similar or identical work will receive an F regardless of who copied from whom. If you have questions about what is considered acceptable work under strict codes of academic honesty, see the publications above or consult me.

The Instructor

This is my fifth year as a USU faculty member. Previously, I taught at Cornell University, Seattle Pacific University, the University of Washington, and Seattle University. Before I began teaching, I worked as a writer and photographer for agricultural magazines. My more recent journalistic work has involved collaborating with my husband, a nature photographer, on packages of text and photos aimed at travel and photography publications. In addition, I worked in nonprofit public relations. My current research interests center around print media (for example, how newspapers portray domestic violence fatalities) and methodology (such as the fairly new method of cognigraphics).

Readings and Assignments

All readings listed for a particular week should be completed before class that week. The readings list is somewhat tentative and I may distribute handouts not noted here, so check with me if you miss a class. I'll put extra copies of all handouts outside my office.

Week #1—January 10

Topics: Introduction, the research process, signaled stopping as a research tool

Read: --

Do: 1.) Prepare a summary of no more than one, double-spaced page describing an area of interest you would like to explore in your research project for this class.

2.) Use signaled stopping on your colleagues' research interest summaries.

Due: Research interest summary due Friday, January 13. E-mail copies to everyone.

Week #2—January 17

Topic: Asking questions

Read: 1.) Handout—"The Three Paradigms of Mass Media Research In Mainstream Communication Journals" (Potter, Cooper, & Dupagne).

2.) Colleagues' research interest summaries.

Do: Come to class Tuesday ready to ask questions about your colleagues' research interests.

Due: Signaled stopping due Tuesday, January 17.

Week #3—January 24

Topic: Asking questions

Read: Handout—"Asking Questions" (Frey, Botan, Friedman, & Kreps).

Do: Work on conceptual terms (definitional fragments) assignment.

Due: Conceptual terms (definitional fragments) assignment due Thursday, January 26. E-mail or deliver copy to Cathy by noon.

Week #4—January 31

Topics: Asking questions, conceptualization of research problem

Read: 1.) Wimmer & Dominick, chapter 1 ("Science and Research").

2.) Wimmer & Dominick, chapter 2 ("Elements of Research").

Do: Meet individually with Cathy before February 2 to discuss research question/s for your final project.

Due: Research question/s assignment (one- to two-page statement) due Thursday, February 2. E-mail or deliver copy to Cathy by noon.

Week #5—February 7

Topics: Conceptualization of research problem, operationalization

Read: Handout—"Communication Concepts 1: Explication" (Chaffee).

Do: Work on the conceptualization for your final project. What are the important distinctions, associations, contingencies?

Due: --

Week #6—February 14

Topic: Operationalization, measurement

Read: 1.) Operationalization handout.

2.) Wimmer & Dominick, chapter 4 ("Sampling").

Do: Work on an inventory of observations relevant to your research problem. Think about how the relevant behaviors would manifest themselves.

Due: Conceptualization of research problem due Tuesday, February 14.

Week #7—February 21

Topics: Measurement and data analysis, study design

Read: Wimmer & Dominick, chapter 10 (“Introduction to Statistics”).

Do: Continue working on an inventory of observations relevant to your research problem.

Due: Specification of relevant observations (operationalization) due Thursday, February 23. E-mail or deliver copy to Cathy by noon.

Week #8—February 28

Topic: Methods

Read: 1.) Wimmer & Dominick, chapter 11 (“Hypothesis Testing”).

2.) Wimmer & Dominick, chapter 5 (“Qualitative Research Methods”).

Do: Work on the design for your study. Consider alternative designs. Prepare to defend your choice of method.

Due: --

Week #9—March 7

Topic: Methods

Read: Wimmer & Dominick, chapter 6 (“Content Analysis”).

Do: Begin developing a design for a feasibility test of your study. Consider procedures you will use to conduct the test.

Due: Design for overall study due Thursday, March 9. E-mail or deliver copy to Cathy by noon.

Week #10—March 13-17

SPRING BREAK

Week #11—March 21

Topic: Methods

Read: Wimmer & Dominick, chapter 7 (“Survey Research”).

Do: Continue working on feasibility test design.

Due: --

Week #12—March 28

Topic: Methods

Read: Review Wimmer & Dominick, chapter 7 (“Survey Research”).

Do: Conduct feasibility test.

Due: Design for feasibility test due Tuesday, March 28

Week #13—April 4

Topic: Methods

Read: 1.) Wimmer & Dominick, chapter 8 (“Longitudinal Research”).

2.) Wimmer & Dominick, chapter 9 (“Experimental Research”).

Do: Conduct feasibility test and begin analyzing results.

Due: --

Week #14—April 11

Topic: Data analysis

Read: 1.) Review Wimmer & Dominick, chapter 10 (“Introduction to Statistics”).
2.) Review Wimmer & Dominick, chapter 11 (“Hypothesis Testing”).
3.) Wimmer & Dominick, chapter 12 (“Basic Statistical Procedures”).

Do: Work on final report (written) and prepare for presentation to class.

Due: --

Week #15—April 18 (No class.)

Topic: --

Read: --

Do: Work individually on final paper and presentation.

Due: --

Week #16—April 25

Topics: Final presentations, class conclusion.

Read: --

Do: Come prepared to present your work and comment on colleagues’ work.

Due: Final report for research project due in my office (308a Animal Science) before noon Wednesday, April 26.