

# Computer Techniques for Communication Professionals

American University Class: COMM-623

Summer/Saturdays 2003

## Course overview

Whether we like it or not, computers are an integral part of any communications field. And making the best use of technology is the key to success in print news, broadcasting, new media, advertising and other areas of communication. People working in communication fields must keep up with the ever changing ways of gathering information and disseminating it. In addition, the people and organizations on which we report keep their information in electronic format and we need to know how to use that information to cover them.

As technology has evolved, so too have audiences who have more sophisticated tastes for information delivery and content and more ways of avoiding messages they want to avoid.

Along with all of these changes come new challenges. Among the issues this raises: Can we maintain a free, democratic society in which there is so little common knowledge and such a large divide between those who have access to information and those who don't? How will laws once applied to traditional media be interpreted in the information age?

## Course goals

Professional communicators of the future must have the skills that will allow them to gather and deliver information using different means than in the past. And they must understand the profound implications of these developments on their profession and the larger society. Those are the subjects this class will address.

This class has two primary goals:

- To give you, as a communications professional, some of the computer skills you will need to be successful in your career; in particular, you will learn how to conduct research and analysis using computer tools. To help accomplish this, virtually all work in the course will be done on the computer. We will make extensive use of electronic mail to communicate with one another.
- To give you an appreciation of the legal, ethical and social issues that arise from the widespread adoption of electronic communications tools.

## Textbook

*Computer-assisted reporting: A practical guide, by Brant Houston*  
*Bedford/St. Martin's; 2nd edition (1999), ISBN: 0312188528*

## Grades

You will be graded on the following criteria. Explanations follow.

1. Data negotiation	15% of grade
2. Research findings summary	15%
3. Story/negotiating memos	10%
4. Second draft	10%
5. Final research assignment (writing and analysis)	25%
6. Quizzes/exercises	15%
7. Class participation	10%

- 1. Data negotiation -- 15 percent of grade.** You will be required to make a request for data from a government agency. This likely will include an initial letter and follow-up calls. This grade will be based on how you do the negotiating, not necessarily what the final outcome is. If you get lucky and get the data right away – you may choose to use that data for your final project.
- 2. Research findings - 15 percent of grade.** Before writing your final project, you will analyze at least one database to be used for your story. You'll be required to report your findings. In addition, you will vet your findings with an expert.
- 3. Drafts (10 percent of grade) and final research assignment - 25 percent of grade.** You will write an in-depth story based on your data analysis, but you also will need to do other reporting such as talking with experts and doing appropriate footwork.
- 4. Story/negotiating memos - 10 percent of grade.** You will update me each class session by writing a memo about your story progress and what you did that week. You also will update me on your data negotiating – including letters and correspondence with the agency.
- 5. In-class work and participation - 10 percent of grade.** You are expected to attend all classes and will be responsible for all material discussed during class. In addition, I will be evaluating you based on your attitude, effort, initiative, participation and other measures of professional behavior. If you need to miss a class, please make arrangements with your instructor to complete the class work at another time.
- 6. Quizzes/exercises – 15 percent of grade.** We'll have periodic quizzes on class materials. In addition, we'll do some in-class exercises, which will be graded.

### **Deadlines and Attendance**

The University expects you to appear regularly and on time to classes. If you miss class sessions it will be unlikely that you will be able to complete your assignments on deadline and your grade will most likely suffer considerably from having missed the material. Work missed due to an excused absence may be made up. An in-class assignment such as a quiz or writing assignment missed due to an unexcused absence, on the other hand, may not be made up and will result in a zero for that particular portion of your grade. *Any student who misses two classes – for any reason -- will be asked to drop the class.*

### **Academic Integrity**

It goes without saying that all work must be your own, original effort. Plagiarism or any other form of academic dishonesty will be dealt with severely. At the least, it will cause you to fail this class. Your work will be checked to verify that it does not contain material that is published elsewhere.

In this class, it is especially important to understand that material on the Internet is protected by the same ethical and legal standards as other published information. The general rule is: The creator of the information has the right to decide how it is used. Others who want to use another's work must seek permission and give credit.

The university administration has asked all faculty members to include this statement in course syllabi:

*"Standards of academic conduct are set forth in the University's Academic Integrity Code. By registering, you have acknowledged your awareness of the Academic Integrity Code, and you are obliged to become familiar with your rights and responsibilities as defined by the Code. Violations of the Academic Integrity Code will not be treated lightly, and disciplinary action will be taken should such violations occur. Please see me if you have any questions about the academic violations described in the Code in general or as they relate to particular requirements for this course."*

**A note about communication**

All assignments should use effective writing including correct grammar and spelling.

**Contacting the instructor**

The instructor will be available following the class on most days. All other office hours will be by appointment only. You are encouraged to e-mail or call to make an appointment. E-mail is the most effective way to reach me.

Email: [jlafleur@american.edu](mailto:jlafleur@american.edu)

Phone: 314-550-3255

Alternate phone: 703-807-2100, ext. 114. This is the phone number for The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, dedicated to helping working journalists. During working hours (9 a.m. to 6 p.m.), please use it only for urgent calls but after 6 p.m., feel free to call for any reason - when you get the message that we're closed, hit 114.(I'm usually there until about 8 p.m.).

I periodically will send materials out via email – if your american.edu address is not your preferred email, please go to my.american.edu and follow the instructions for forwarding your american.edu address to another address.

I will make use of Blackboard for this class. Class announcements and documents will be placed there. You should check it regularly.

## Schedule

The following is the tentative schedule for class sessions. Keep in mind, the instructor may need to make some adjustment as the class progresses. Reading assignments should be completed prior to the class session for which they are listed. Any handouts listed will be provided at least one week earlier. If you must miss a class, please make arrangements to get copies of reading material.

Each class will be divided into four sections, plus breaks and a lunch hour. The typical breakdown will be:

- I. 9:00 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.
- II. 10:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.  
lunch break
- III. 1:30 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.
- IV. 3:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.

May 10:

- I. Course introduction and computer familiarization
- II. Introduction to computer-assisted reporting
- III. Introduction to spreadsheets with exercise
- IV. Start discussion about projects and negotiating for databases

Reading: *Houston, Chapters 1- 3, 8*

May 17:

- I. Electronic research techniques.
- II. More on electronic research/Evaluating Web sites/Getting data from Web sites
- III. Introduction to databases
- IV. Database exercise

Reading: *Nora Paul, Computer-assisted research*  
*The Wired Journalists* by Mike Wendland: Introduction and Wired  
News Gathering, [www.rtnda.org/resources/wiredweb/index.html](http://www.rtnda.org/resources/wiredweb/index.html)

*Houston, Chapters 4 & 7*

“Evaluating Web Resources,” by Jan Alexander and Marsha Ann Tate  
[muse.widener.edu/Wolfgram-Memorial-Library/webevaluation/webeval.htm](http://muse.widener.edu/Wolfgram-Memorial-Library/webevaluation/webeval.htm)

Selection from *The Online Journalist* by Redick and King

**Due by end of class:** First negotiating memo

May 24 – no class, Memorial Day weekend

May 31:

- I. Spreadsheet/ database refresher
- II.- IV. Start analysis of individual data sets
  - a. **Computer-assisted reporting assignment proposals due**
  - b. **Negotiating update memo due**
  - c. **List of what sessions you plan to cover at the IRE conference next week due**

June 7:

Investigative Reporters and Editors conference.

National Press Club

This is a great opportunity to hear from some really great journalists about their work. You'll write a report about sessions at the conference. You also will use the conference as an opportunity to talk with some experts about your proposed stories. If you are participating in student newsroom for covering the conference, you may turn in whatever stories you write for the Web site, but at least one of them should be from Saturday's sessions.

- **Story project memo due**
- **Data findings due**
- **Negotiating memo due**

June 14:

I. IRE Conference wrap-up and discussion

II. Spreadsheet/Database review.

Building your own database

III. Importing spreadsheet and database data

IV. Work on research projects

- **Draft of story due at start of class**
- **Final negotiating summary due**

June 21:

I. From bits and bytes to stories – how to report on your findings

II. Work on research projects for the rest of the class period.

- **Final story due by end of class**