INF 1240H: Research Methods

Time: Wednesdays, 6:30 pm - 9:30 pm
Location: Bissell 507
Instructor: Alan Galey, Faculty of Information
Email: alan.galey [at] [university of toronto domain name]
Response time: usually by end of next business day (excl. weekends)
Main office: Bissell 646
Office hours: Wednesdays 1:30 - 2:30 and after class
TA: Karen McEwan, Faculty of Information


Overview

This course introduces students to a number of research methods useful for academic and professional investigations of information practices, texts and technologies. By examining the applications, strengths and major criticisms of methodologies drawn from both the qualitative and quantitative traditions, this course permits an understanding of the various decisions and steps involved in crafting (and executing) a research methodology, as well as a critically informed assessment of published research.

The course offers an overview of the different approaches, considerations and challenges involved in information research. In addition to reviewing core human research methods such as interviews, ethnographies, surveys and experiments, we will explore methods used in critical analysis of texts and technologies, with an emphasis on a holistic approach to research methods, connecting design and dissemination. We will also discuss mixed method approaches, case studies, participatory and user-centered research, as well as research methods from the arts and humanities.

Learning objectives

The objectives of the course are:

- To provide students with the tools and skills required to understand research terminology and assess published research;
- To identify the types of methods best suited for investigating different types of problems and questions;
- To develop research questions that are based on and build upon a critical appraisal of existing research;
- To design a research proposal; and
- To begin initial preparations for embarking on a new research project.
Format

The class will meet for three hours each week for a lecture, which will include in-class discussions, group activities, and case studies. On their own time, students must complete weekly course readings and written assignments, as well as contribute to a collaborative research log.

Course materials

Our required textbook is available at the U of T bookstore:


Additional readings (both required and recommended) will be accessible via links on Blackboard. Several classes will have assigned chapters from the following two books, both of which are accessible online via U Toronto Libraries:


I will also make available a list of research methods resources available from the library. Students are encouraged to explore different research methods textbooks and have at least one or two on their shelves, for the future, which are relevant to their own particular area of information research.

Website / online resources

Course materials and resources aimed at helping students with assignments and key concepts will be made available online, through Blackboard (http://portal.utoronto.ca) and through this course weblog. Students are responsible for keeping up to date with these online resources, and are expected to log into Blackboard during the first week of class to enroll for email notices. Please be sure to check Blackboard periodically for new materials, announcements, updates and other important information.

Evaluation

15% Group research blog (first evaluation)
20% Group research blog (second evaluation)
25% SSHRC Program of Work
40% Full research proposal

Assignments must be submitted via Blackboard by noon on the due date. (The reason this deadline is set at noon, not midnight, is so that we have time to help students with any technical problems with the submission system.) Extensions will only be granted in the event of illness or emergency, and then only with appropriate documentation. Late assignments (defined here as an assignment submitted after the deadline) will be penalized by one full letter grade per week (e.g. from A to A-), for a maximum of two weeks. After that point, late assignments will no longer be
accepted. Furthermore, late assignments may not receive detailed feedback or comments. Written assignments that do not meet a minimum standard (in terms of legibility, formatting and proofreading) will be returned for re-submission, with late penalties in full effect.

**General assignment guidelines**

The SSHRC proposal and full research proposal assignments must be submitted electronically as PDF files via Blackboard. The full research proposal must be submitted in double-spaced 12 pt serif font, but the SSHRC Program of Work should be single-spaced and follow the formatting instructions given in the SSHRC online help file. Assignments at the graduate level should be free of writing errors, and this is also true of genres like research proposals and SSHRC applications. Be sure to proofread your assignments carefully before submitting them, and refer to an appropriate style guide on questions of grammar, punctuation, and usage. If you find writing to be a challenge, consult the resources listed under Writing Support below. Assignments with frequent errors in grammar, punctuation, usage, and other basic writing mechanics will not be eligible for an A-range grade.

**Referencing.** The American Psychological Association (APA) citation style is the most commonly used one in academic writing in the social sciences, while Chicago and MLA (Modern Language Association) are the most common in the humanities (at least in North America). For this course, you will be expected to use APA style in all assignments, given that it's one of the most efficient citation styles for writing research proposals in any discipline. (Even humanists writing SSRHC proposals will often use an author-date style like APA, even if it's not the native style of their discipline.) However, the Chicago Manual of Style Online is nonetheless an excellent writing reference for our course on matters of grammar, usage, and other writing conventions apart from citation. You can find it here: [http://go.utlib.ca/cat/6662347](http://go.utlib.ca/cat/6662347)

**Images.** Students can include copyrighted images in their assignments as long as they follow the Canadian Copyright Act's current exceptions for fair dealing, in that the images must only be used for the purposes of criticism or review, and each image must be accompanied by:
(a) the source; and
(b) the name of the author(s) (if given in the source)

**Acceptable secondary sources.** As graduate students, you will be expected to use a majority of academic (i.e. peer reviewed) sources when writing your term paper. The course schedule, blog, and lectures will include many suggestions for secondary sources on various topics related to the course. However, students are strongly encouraged to track down those resources that are best suited to their specific area of interest or inquiry, rather than rely too heavily on those provided in class. Media texts (books, comics, television episodes, films, videogames, websites, etc.) can be used and referenced as needed, but should always be treated as artifacts of study and analyzed accordingly. Here's a good position to adopt:

"The materials of popular culture may become raw materials for our creative expression, vehicles for exploring aspects of our own personalities, and shared points of reference to facilitate social interaction. Anthropologists and historians look at artifacts as materials that encapsulate the values and practices of another culture. We can look at the contents of mass media as artifacts that help us to better understand our own culture. In both cases, though, deciphering an artifact's meanings is a complex process, because the same artifact may serve multiple purposes, operate in multiple contexts, and become invested with multiple meanings." Reproduced from Henry Jenkins' (2000) *Children's Culture Study Guide*

For cutting edge information, news, announcements, etc., popular press articles are acceptable. But these should be used to supplement or update rather than replace peer reviewed sources, and should never be used to explain a theoretical concept. They should also come from credible, verifiable sources, who have the credentials (whatever these may be) to back up their claims.
Online sources are fine, as long as you can determine who wrote the content and for what purpose, and are prepared to defend the author's credibility and expertise if questioned. For example, if you define critical discourse analysis, your definition should not come from Wikipedia -- even if the Wikipedia entry happens to be a good one. That said, my definition of expertise is flexible. For example, if you're looking for parents' reactions to the Harry Potter phenomenon, an online forum where fathers, mothers and other caregivers discuss the Harry Potter books and films is an excellent source of expertise.

**Academic integrity**

The life of the mind depends upon respect for the ideas of others, and especially for the labour that went into the creation of those ideas. Accordingly, the University of Toronto has a strict zero-tolerance policy on plagiarism, as defined in section B.I.1. (d) of the University's Code of Behavior on Academic Matters. Please make sure that you:

- Consult the University's site on Academic Integrity: [http://academicintegrity.utoronto.ca/](http://academicintegrity.utoronto.ca/)
- Acquaint yourself with the Code and Appendix "A" Section 2; [http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/policies/behaveac.htm](http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/policies/behaveac.htm)
- Consult the site How Not to Plagiarize: [http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/using-sources/how-not-to-plagiarize](http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/using-sources/how-not-to-plagiarize)

Remember: plagiarism through negligence, as distinct from deliberate intent, is still plagiarism in the eyes of the University. Take notes carefully, use quotation marks religiously when copying and pasting from digital sources (so that no one, including you, mistakes someone else's words for your own), and document your research process. And always, when in doubt, ask.

**Writing support**

As stated in the iSchool's Grade Interpretation Guidelines, work that is not well written and grammatically correct will not generally be considered eligible for a grade in the A range, regardless of its quality in other respects. With this in mind, please make use of the writing support provided to graduate students by the SGS Office of English Language and Writing Support ([http://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/currentstudents/Pages/English-Language-and-Writing-Support.aspx](http://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/currentstudents/Pages/English-Language-and-Writing-Support.aspx)). The services are designed to target the needs of both native and non-native speakers and all programs are free. Please consult the current workshop schedule ([http://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/currentstudents/Pages/Current-Years-Courses.aspx](http://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/currentstudents/Pages/Current-Years-Courses.aspx)) for more information.

The SGS Office of English Language and Writing Support provides writing support for graduate students. The services are designed to target the needs of both native and non-native speakers of English and include non-credit courses, single-session workshops, individual writing consultations, and website resources. These programs are free. Please avail yourself of these services, if necessary.

**Special needs**

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, if you have a disability or health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach the instructor and/or the Accessibility Services Office at [http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/as](http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/as) as soon as possible. The Accessibility Services staff are available by appointment to assess specific needs, provide referrals, and arrange appropriate accommodations.

**Credit:** Some of the language in this syllabus has been adapted from Prof. Sara Grimes's INF 1240H (Research Methods) syllabus.
Assignment Details

See the syllabus for general assignment guidelines. More information about the assignments may be posted on Blackboard as the course progresses.

Group Research Blog
Postings due each week by Friday, 5:00 pm (evaluated at the end of Week 6 and Week 12)

Students will form groups of 10-12 in order to collaborate on a group research blog. Students should expect to contribute original posts on a weekly basis, and to engage in discussion via comments. I will post weekly discussion questions on Blackboard to which the blog posts should respond.

The blogs will not only serve as an online archive of each student's progress in this course, but will provide a place to record ideas and resources that you're thinking of using in your research project (and proposal), as well as a forum to voice your thoughts and questions about weekly readings and topics covered in class. Group members are expected to interact with each other, commenting or replying to each other's contributions in order to engage in (and ultimately produce) an ongoing dialogue about research methods and the research process. Links and block quotes are welcome, but these should never "stand alone" -- they should always be accompanied by discussion of contents and an explanation of why they are included.

Each blog will be reviewed twice over the course of the semester—once during the first half of the semester, and once during the second half. Blogs may also be discussed in class, so always ensure your contributions to the blog are reasonably regular, and your group should be prepared to discuss their blog with the rest of the class at any point in the course. Students should keep a log of their blog contributions (just date and url, in txt file format) and upload their log to Blackboard by the evaluation deadlines. Be sure to record posts and comments alike, both on your home blog and on other course blogs if you choose to be part of other groups' discussions.

Your grade for this assignment will be based on the consistency and relevance of your individual contribution to the blog. Here, "consistency" means that contributions are made on a weekly basis, and reflect a timely, ongoing engagement with weekly readings, materials, research, etc. "Relevance" means that the contribution contains one or more of the following: familiarity with course readings and other materials (lectures, group discussions, etc.), as demonstrated through the use of specific examples, author names or theoretical concepts; inclusion of themes and points that have a clear and direct relevance to research methods, their application, as well as associated issues and debates; discussion of literature, problems, ideas, examples and current events that pertain directly to your intended research topic/proposal, which includes consideration of the course readings and themes. It is therefore important that all of your posts and comments include a signature (First and Last Name), so that your work can be identified as yours.

Groups can decide for themselves which blogging platform they will use, depending on familiarity and personal preference. Some good free ones to consider are WordPress and Blogger. (I advise against using Tumblr, as it can be difficult to attribute names to posts.)

Contributions will (and should) vary in terms of length and topic, but try to keep your posts brief (100-175 words) and to the point. Links and block quotes are welcome, but these should never stand alone -- they should always be accompanied by discussion of contents and an explanation of why they are included.
SSHRC Program of Work
Due Friday, Feb. 12, by noon (via Blackboard)
1 page, single spaced (not including bibliography) as per SSHRC guidelines

For this assignment, students will produce a two-page research proposal that follows the actual guidelines, formatting requirements and instructions that applicants must follow in completing the "Outline of Proposed Research" component of the SSHRC Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship application. This assignment will give you a chance to start formulating your ideas (topic, thesis, methodology and research design) for the long version research proposal that is due at the end of the semester. You will also have the opportunity to get some early feedback and advice in terms of the project’s scope, design, and possible resources. Additionally, for those of you planning to actually apply for a CGS, this assignment will provide an excellent opportunity to workshop and refine a first draft of the “Program of Study” document that is a required component of your SSHRC application.

The assignment can therefore function as either an exercise in creating a mock proposal, which will help prepare you for future grant (or scholarship) applications, or a forum for crafting an actual first draft SSHRC proposal. In both cases, the assignment will allow you to hit the ground running on the key learning objectives of this course, as well as get a head start on your final assignment.

We will go over the details and requirements of the SSHRC research proposal, and set aside some time to brainstorm possible research topics, during the first few weeks of lectures. In the meantime, you can expect to include the following information in your completed assignment:

- A description of your degree program, its research training component, and how it meets SSHRC’s eligibility criteria;
- A well-structured outline of your research design, including research question, context, objectives, methodology and contribution to the advancement of knowledge;
- Description of any relevant work experience, community involvement or other extracurricular activity;
- Bibliography (full details for all sources cited)

Given that we won’t have covered many specific research methods by this point in the course, the grading of this assignment will emphasize the articulation of the research question, context, objectives, and contribution to knowledge. Project design, ethics provisions (if applicable), and methodological protocols will weigh more heavily in the full proposal at the end of the course.

Full Research Proposal
Due Friday, April 8, by noon (via Blackboard)
3,000 - 3,500 words, excluding Works Cited

For this assignment, you will revise, extend and elaborate upon the short proposal you wrote for the SSHRC assignment, in order to create a fully developed research proposal on the topic of your choice. If you are completing a thesis, extended essay or project as part of your academic program, you can tackle this assignment as a first attempt at a thesis/project proposal. If you are not currently planning on undertaking a thesis or other research project, you might use this proposal to envision or even pitch a project that you might want to undertake in a professional capacity – for a community partner, at your current place of employment, or for your “dream job” later on.

Your research proposal should provide a project title and contain the following sections:

1. Introduction: Introduce your topic and study, including thesis statement and research questions, which may or may not take the form of an hypothesis (OR suspicions OR assumptions OR bias OR hunch, depending on the disciplinary context of your proposal);
2. Background: what got you interested in this topic, why is it worth investigating, what interest or impact will the research have, and what theoretical framework do you intend to apply to your research, analysis and discussion?

3. Literature Review: what bodies of literature and key texts will you include in your final literature review? Don't forget to include literature on your method(s), as well as as on the subject of your planned research;

4. Research Methodology: be as specific as possible, and focus on a single primary research method for this assignment, though your proposal may leave room for a mix of other methods. If you’re planning on conducting human research, be sure to include a description of your plans for securing ethics approval;

5. Contribution to Knowledge: Who are the stakeholders in your project? Who will benefit from the research you produce, and how will you ensure that your work reaches relevant audiences? Remember that the relevant audiences are not necessarily other academics.

## Schedule and Readings

**Week 1 13 Jan**

**Introduction: the Landscape of Information Research**

- no reading; review of course organization, expectations, and key themes
- organize blogging groups

**Weeks 2-5: Generating Research Questions**

**Week 2 20 Jan**

**Project Design and the Art of the Research Question**

- assigned reading
  - Luker, ch. 1, 2 & 3
- recommended reading
  - SSHRC website: [SSHRC's priority areas for funding](http://go.utlib.ca/cat/7649630)
  - full application instructions for SSHRC’s CGS Master’s scholarship program

**Week 3 27 Jan**

**Reviewing (and Finding) the Relevant Literature**

- assigned reading
  - Luker, ch. 4, 5 & Appendix 1
  - tba
- recommended reading
  - tba

**Week 4 3 Feb**

**Thinking Through Writing**

- assigned reading
  - Knight, Chapter 1, "Starting with Writing," and Chapter 9, "Writing, Disseminating, and Influencing"
- recommended reading


**Week 5**

**Research Ethics**

10 Feb

- SSHRC Program of Work due this week
- guest speaker: Dean Sharpe, Office of Research Ethics, University of Toronto
- assigned readings
  - Knight, ch. 7
  - School of Graduate Studies' Student Guide on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Human Subjects
- recommended reading
  - online tutorial on Tri-Council policy for ethical research involving human subjects: tcps2core.ca/welcome

17 Feb Reading Break (no class)

**Weeks 6-10: Generating Data**

**Week 6**

**Surveys and Statistical Literacy**

24 Feb

- assigned reading
  - Neuman and Robson, Chapter 8: "Survey Research" + pp. 115-7 and 228-37
  - Knight, ch. 4, pp. 87-94, 176-82
- recommended reading
  - Luker, ch. 6

**Week 7**

**Ethnography, Interviews, and Other Face-to-Face Methods**

2 March

- blogs reviewed at the end of this week
- assigned reading


- **recommended reading**
  - Luker, ch. 8

---

**Week 8**

9 March  
**Analyzing Texts and Artifacts**

- **assigned reading**
  - update
- **recommended reading**

---

**Week 9**

16 March  
**Experiments and Quasi-Experiments**

- **assigned reading**
  - Neuman and Robson, Chapter 9: "Experimental Research"
- **recommended reading**
  - Knight, ch. 3, subsection on experiments

---

**Week 10**

23 March  
**Performance as Research Method**

- guest speaker: Prof. David Phillips, Faculty of Information
- **assigned reading**
  - tba
- **recommended reading**
  - tba

---

**Weeks 11-12: Analyzing Data, Interpreting Meaning, Communicating Results**

**Week 11**

30 March  
**From Design to Analysis to Interpretation**

- Full Research Proposal due this week
- blogs reviewed at the end of this week
- **assigned reading**
Week 12  Peer-Review Workshop
6 April

- assigned reading
  - Fitzpatrick, K. (2009). Chapter 1: Peer review. In *Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy*. [Note: for class we won't read the final published version from NYU Press, but rather the open peer-review version at MediaCommons Press: mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/mcpress/plannedobsolescence/](mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/mcpress/plannedobsolescence/). This version gives us a glimpse of the open peer-review process at work. Feel free to explore the review comments attached to specific paragraphs, as well as the posted reviews from the external reviewer. Note also that the interface can be a bit confusing. In the "Contents" tab, if you click the heading "One: Peer Review" it will only bring up the opening section for that chapter. To read the entire chapter, you'll need to click through each of the subheadings to bring up those sections.]

- recommended reading