

# **Computer-Assisted Reporting**

## **JMC 40004/50004**

**Spring 2016, Rm 117 Franklin; 12:30 – 1:45 Tuesday/Thursday**

**Professor Karl Idsvoog**

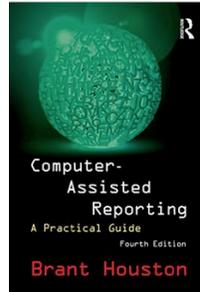
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Office Hours: Monday/Wednesday 10:30 - Noon

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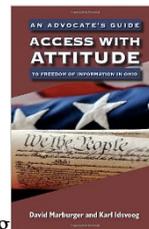
Other times by appointment

REQUIRED TEXT: Computer-Assisted Reporting – 4th Edition



by Brant Houston

REQUIRED TEXT: Access with Attitude



by Dave Marburger & Karl Idsvoog

**Course Outcomes:** By the time you finish this course, you'll know how to do basic data calculations using Microsoft Excel and how to do basic data queries on Microsoft Access. Far more important, you will understand that for nearly every story of significance it will be important to request the data. By the time you finish this course, you will know how to properly frame a public records request when asking for either printed or electronic data. By the time you finish this course, you will improve your ability to negotiate for public records over the phone. A primary goal, one totally up to you, is to get you thinking and acting like a journalist, not a human microphone stand.

**FIRST ASSIGNMENT: READ THIS ENTIRE SYLLABUS TODAY.**

# Journalism

Journalism requires verification. That's true for a feature story as well as a political story or a business story or an education story or any kind of story. Journalism requires verification. When Donald Trump says there were thousands in New Jersey celebrating as the Twin Towers fell, the journalist asks for proof. The journalist asks for evidence.

Sports Illustrated forgot that. It published a cover story on the football player whose girlfriend had been in a terrible accident and after a miraculous recovery she discovers she has cancer and dies from that. There was only one problem. The girlfriend didn't exist. The reporter didn't discover that because the reporter failed to do basic journalism. He didn't confirm and verify the information. So instead of publishing a feature story, the reporter published a national embarrassment.

<http://deadspin.com/manti-teos-dead-girlfriend-the-most-heartbreaking-an-5976517>

As a journalist, it's pretty simple. The journalist doesn't believe anyone. The journalist verifies and confirms. Rolling Stone forgot that, and a talented writer with a promising career may never get a job in the industry again. She forgot journalism 101; she didn't confirm and verify. When a woman tells a journalist she's been gang raped at a university fraternity, a journalist doesn't just blindly accept what is said. The journalist confirms and verifies. Rolling Stone didn't do that and like Sports Illustrated, published a national embarrassment.

The story did win an award. It won the "Error of the Year Award" from the Poynter Institute.

<http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/rolling-stone-gang-rape-story-wins-error-of-the-year-award/article/2557601>

<http://www.poynter.org/news/mediawire/306801/the-year-in-media-errors-and-corrections-2014/>

As a journalist, it makes no difference if you are a feature, business, medical, economic, political or sports reporter, it's simple. A journalist confirms and verifies. What evidence is there to support what the person claims to be true? At CBS, 60 Minutes forgot that. Any CBS news manager who would have spent 15 minutes checking the CBS News archives would have easily found significant problems with Lara Logan's reporting. But there was not sufficient editorial control; there was not sufficient fact checking. Instead, 60 Minutes broadcast a national embarrassment and apologized for it shortly thereafter.

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/cbs-news-and-reporter-lara-logan-face-brutal-criticism-on-flawed-benghazi-report/2013/11/11/b2f55d8c-4b1f-11e3-ac54-aa84301ced81\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/cbs-news-and-reporter-lara-logan-face-brutal-criticism-on-flawed-benghazi-report/2013/11/11/b2f55d8c-4b1f-11e3-ac54-aa84301ced81_story.html)

<http://www.whenjournalismfails.com/2014/12/what-si-60-minutes-and-rolling-stone.html>

# JOURNALISTS ARE ALERT FOR THE LIE

Has anyone ever lied to you? Suppose you're moving to a new city and you're looking for an apartment. You ask the landlord how safe the apartment is. The landlord says it's in an extremely safe, low-crime area. You decide to rent the apartment. As you leave the rental office, you see two police cars pull in; one with uniformed officers another with plain-clothes detectives. You ask one of the detectives why they're at the apartment. The detective says they're following up on a homicide that happened at the apartment building last week.

Was the landlord lying to you or telling the truth? Is the building in an extremely safe area or a dangerous one? Are there multiple crimes or is the homicide the police are investigating a rare and isolated incident? Might it be a tragic domestic violence incident and the first crime committed at the apartment building in a decade? There's one thing that answers the question.

## THE DATA

What does the crime data show? Does the police data show multiple crimes or just the one? We live in a computerized world filled with data. And unlike China or Azerbaijan where the public has little to no access to government records, in this country, the public has a right to see how the public agency operates. How much is every public employee paid? It's public record. How many bids were received from contractors wanting to build the new stadium being built with tax money? It's public record. How many traffic citations are issued? It's public record. How much did a house sell for? It's public record. How much did the university president of a public university like Kent State charge on the university charge card? It's public record. Every semester, you fill out evaluations of professors. Those are public records. By the way, why aren't they online and easily available to students? This is a 3 credit journalism course. When you take it, how much do you pay to the athletic department? It is public record, and you can click on the URL to see what you pay from the student project produced in this course.

<http://et.kent.edu/jmc40004/fees/>

## Diversity Statement

(How do you check if an organization's dedication to diversity is more than just words?)

The Kent State University School of Journalism and Mass Communication recognizes the importance of a diverse faculty and student body and embraces the concept that diversity will foster the acknowledgement, empowerment and inclusion of any person.

The School of Journalism and Mass Communication teaches the history,

culture, values and notable achievement of persons who represent the world's diverse community. The mission of the school is to offer a strong curriculum, enriched by a legal and ethical foundation, which recruits, retains, promotes and hires from this diverse community.

The School of Journalism and Mass Communication believes that the highest levels of success, knowledge and progress arise when we learn from others who are not of our own national origin, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, age, gender, physical and mental ability and social class. We welcome the many opportunities to examine challenges that may arise from differences.

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So how would you check if that statement is meaningful or simply a collection of empty words? The answer: data. What the public records show will tell you whether the public agency is truly dedicated to diversity.

## THE JOURNALIST

The role of the journalist is NOT to be a human microphone stand. Journalism is not stenography. Journalism is not advertising. Journalism is not public relations. Despite how some sports reporters act, journalism is not cheerleading. Journalism requires verification. What are the facts? What is the evidence? How do you know something is true? One of the best ways to get at the facts is to get at the data, to review the records.

Watch this story <https://vimeo.com/32447173> about Kent State football players who said some rather alarming things. And for next class, briefly describe a.) what specific actions should have been taken by the athletic department after it learned of this conduct and, b.) what records would you expect to exist that you could request to verify what the athletic department did? In the upper left hand corner put the story slug: athletic discipline and your name. Print out a hard copy of your assignment and give it to me at the beginning of the next class. Put an electronic copy in the Proj\_Complete folder on the ISIS. This is your second graded assignment. The first was to read this syllabus. This is what is called an "embedded assignment." Be prepared to discuss next class the purpose of an embedded assignment. Also, check the most recent lawsuit filed against Kent State University. Who is the plaintiff and what does the suit entail? Add that information on your written assignment with the athletic department piece.

Brant Houston writes in his book, ***"No student or beginning journalist should be without these (computer-assisted reporting) skills."*** He is absolutely right. CAR skills are essential. In the 4th Edition he makes a superb point. "In journalism, finding interesting data, visualizing it, and presenting it in a pleasing format is not enough. Today's news audience wants to know what the data reveals and means and what analysis of the data says about whether systems and policies are working and society is being served.

An analysis of the data found some surprising things on the Ashley Madison website, namely that hardly any women actually use the site.

<http://gizmodo.com/almost-none-of-the-women-in-the-ashley-madison-database-1725558944>

As the above story states, “Out of 5.5 million female accounts, roughly zero percent had ever shown any kind of activity at all, after the day they were created.”

**Course Description:** We will do three basic things: go after information (data/public records), analyze it, and write/produce stories about it. In order to go after data you need to know how to prepare a public records request. That’s one thing we’ll address early so you can apply that skill to your reporting. **Access with Attitude** is your handbook of strategy on how to go after public records. Although Dave Marburger and I focus on Ohio law, the strategy sections are applicable for reporters working in any state.

In this course, you’ll also improve your web searching capability. You’ll learn how to use a spreadsheet (Excel) and a database (Access).

### **Math**

What’s the difference between the average and the median value? And what in the heck is the mode and why should you care?

***If you have a black hole in math, if math makes you nervous, take a breath and relax.***

We are not doing advanced calculus. We’re using software programs that will do computations for you. That’s great if you get it right. Do it wrong, and now you have lots and lots of inaccurate information. What we will be doing in this class is learning how to find data and how to ask questions of the data. If you know right now you’re going to have problems doing percentages or if a huge table of numbers just makes you shiver, come and see me.

### **A Few Rules and Policies**

This is a journalism course. Fabrication is NOT allowed. Making up quotes or information is not ethical or acceptable. *Anyone found guilty of fabrication will be given an F for the course.*

Plagiarism, using someone else’s work as your own, is unacceptable. *Anyone found guilty of plagiarism will be given an F for the course.* Attribution is essential. If you have questions while writing/producing a story regarding proper attribution, please talk to me BEFORE you hand in the assignment.

**Saving Your Work:** Save your work to **your** CAR folder on the ISIS. We’ll review procedures on that today. Please back this up on your flash drive. Keep copies of your

work. Twice the ISIS has crashed deleting everything there. So you need to protect your work.

Your user name for the ISIS is your Kent State email address prior to the @ symbol. My Kent State email is [kidsvoog@kent.edu](mailto:kidsvoog@kent.edu) so my user name on the ISIS is kidsvoog. Your password is the last 4 digits of your banner number. When you sign on to ISIS, you should have three folders show up for this class: Project\_Complete, Share, and your personal folder. All assignments, handouts and data exercises will be in the share folder.

### **ASSIGNMENTS, GRADES, EXAMS**

Each assignment is given a specific point value. For written projects, you'll be graded on various elements on a 5 point scale where 5=A, 4=B, 3=C, 2=D, 1=F. Some elements will be weighted more than others. If an item is worth 10 points, simply double the grading scale, 10=A, 8=B, 6=C, 4=D, 2= F. For a quiz or exam, you'll be given a point and letter grade. **If you have any concerns or questions about your grade, do NOT delay seeking clarification. It is YOUR responsibility to come and see me regarding any grades.** Do NOT send email. Call. Come and see me so we can discuss and clarify whatever questions you have.

This is a journalism course. You should not be turning in projects with typos, misspelled words or grammatical mistakes.

Our schedule (subject to change) calls for you to write three major projects (Excel CAR report, Access CAR report, CAR profile). There's a midterm exam (lectures, public records, Excel) and a final exam (lectures, public records, Excel & Access). And we'll be doing additional reporting assignment and story pitches.

**IMPORTANT:** For the first part of the course I will provide lots of direction. We'll go step-by-step through the process of getting and analyzing data.

## **IMPORTANT**

**Your final project is up to you.** It is up to you to go after the data you're seeking. **It is up to you to come up with a worthwhile story to pursue.** Start thinking right now what project you may want to pursue. The final project is not something you can delay or hope to accomplish if you wait until the week before it's due. If you do that, your final project will turn into a reporting disaster. **Take advantage of the opportunity.** This course provides you the time and support to produce a story that can have impact and a story that can help get you a job. Produce a story that matters.

You can find lots of examples at IRE.org (Investigative Reporters & Editors), and we will be reviewing this. If you actually want to be a reporter, this is an organization worth joining.

*This course provides you with the time and tools to do a great piece of work. This course is reporting opportunity. Will you waste that opportunity or take advantage of it? The choice is yours.*

**Attendance counts.** Show up late, you lose 1% of your grade for every class you are late. The six o'clock news starts at six o'clock. You don't show up at 6:01. **Being one second late is late.** Journalists have to be on time. If you have a course or job conflict that makes it difficult to be here at the start of class, please see me immediately.

A factual error in a story is an F. Double check. Verify.

A misspelled name in a story is an F. Double check. Get the names right.

For broadcast pieces, a misspelled word in a graphic is an F.

Any assignment missing deadline is an F. Assignments not turned in at all are given a double F. You know your schedule. If you need additional time, come and see me and we'll work it out. Don't wait until the day before the assignment is due. If you're asking for an extension the day of or the day before an assignment is due the answer is simple: NO. In short, conduct yourself like a professional.

Some of you may come up with databases that we want to pursue. There may be news events that provide reporting possibilities. So there will be some flexibility in the course.

## **EXTRA CREDIT**

Extra credit projects are available. All extra credit projects must be approved in writing by the beginning of class Thursday, April 7. All extra credit projects are due, unless stipulated otherwise in writing, by beginning of class, Tuesday, May 3..

## **ONLINE V BROADCAST**

We have people with a variety of interests in this course. You will not be locked into a single format.

## **PROBLEMS WITH THE COURSE OR ANY ASSIGNMENT**

As we go through the mechanics of Excel and Access, do not be shy. We will go through the software step-by-step. If you don't understand, just raise your hand and stop the process. As we go through the mechanics, I will try to be as explicit as possible. For reporting assignments, that is not always true.

**IMPORTANT: I will often give vague instructions.** That is intentional. A critical skill for any reporter to develop is the ability to clarify information. I will not tell you what notes to take. When you go to a news conference or go into an editorial review with your managing editor or senior producer, nobody tells you what notes to take. Nobody tells you how to

prepare. They simply expect you to conduct yourself as a professional journalist. I'm here to train professionals and to help you become a professional journalist.

**If you have a complaint about the course or an assignment, do NOT remain silent. Come and see me. That is YOUR responsibility.** If you feel frustrated, do not remain silent. Come and see me. If you do not understand the requirements of any specific assignment, do not remain silent. Come and see me. It is YOUR RESPONSIBILITY to ask questions and to clarify the assignment. DO NOT ASSUME. Do NOT send complaints via email, although please feel free to put your complaint or concern in writing. In fact, I encourage you to write your complaint. That helps you focus. But once written, we need to discuss it. One of the skills essential for reporters to develop is the ability to solve problems. Seldom are personnel, reporting, or production problems solved via email. We will probably do some team projects. If you have a problem with a team member, do not avoid the problem. Solve it. Remember, if your team member is not doing his or her job, it will hurt YOUR grade.

**REMINDER:** I can foresee where some of you may have trouble at first catching on to using a spreadsheet or a database. If you are having a problem, please do NOT avoid it. Come and see me ASAP so we can solve the problem.

Some of you may be in this course simply because it fills a requirement and you can't take any other course. Don't be sad. You should be incredibly happy. Reporters who don't have CAR skills are facing an incredible disadvantage in the job market. Why would any news manager want to hire a reporter who doesn't have CAR skills? Develop your CAR skills and you increase your employability. Develop your CAR skills, and you'll be able to do those stories that break news, that have impact. Use this course to do what journalists are supposed to do.

There are several skills you should be developing and improving that are directly relevant to the professional curriculum required of an accredited journalism program. The official description from JMC is below, and I've boldfaced those items we will be stressing in this class.

*As an accredited member of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, we are committed to developing a curriculum designed to meet twelve professional competencies. This course, as part of a larger program, contributes to our development of:*

THOUGHTFUL, PROFICIENT COMMUNICATORS...

- ◆ **write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communications professions, audiences and purposes they serve.**
- ◆ demonstrate an understanding of the history and role of professionals and institutions in shaping communications.
- ◆ **understand concepts and apply theories in the use and presentation of images and information. (How do you bring the data to life; how do you humanize the data?)**

- ◆ **apply current tools and technologies appropriate for the communications professions in which they work, and to understand the digital world.**

...WHO ARE CREATIVE, CRITICAL THINKERS...

- ◆ **think critically, creatively and independently.**

...TRAINED TO UNCOVER AND EVALUATE INFORMATION...

- ◆
- ◆ **conduct research and evaluate information by methods appropriate to the communications professions in which they work.**
- ◆ **critically evaluate their own work and that of others for accuracy and fairness, clarity, appropriate style and grammatical correctness.**
- ◆ **apply basic numerical and statistical concepts.**

...WITHIN A LEGAL AND ETHICAL FRAMEWORK...

- ◆ **Understand and apply the principles and laws of freedom of speech and press in the United States, as well as receive instruction in and understand the range of systems of freedom of expression around the world, including the right to dissent, to monitor and criticize power, and to assemble and petition for redress of grievances;**
- ◆ **demonstrate an understanding of professional ethical principles and work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity.**

...IN A DIVERSE AND GLOBAL SOCIETY.

- ◆ **demonstrate an understanding of gender, race ethnicity, sexual orientation, and, as appropriate, other forms of diversity in domestic society in relation to mass communications.**
- ◆ **demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of people and cultures and of the significance and impact of mass communications in a global society.**

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To be sure I don't miss any syllabi statements required by the department, I'm including them here:

### **JMC Syllabus Statements**

#### **Statement on Cheating and Plagiarism:**

The School of Journalism and Mass Communication deals in publishable works and educates its students for various aspects of publishing and other communications professions. Within this framework, every student must be aware of the following rules and definitions while in school or on the job:

Fabrication is, in phrasing first used by the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, the cardinal sin. Faking quotations, faking “facts”, reporting things that did not happen are not only reprehensible; they could be actionable in court.

Plagiarizing, as defined by Webster, is “to steal and pass off as one’s own the ideas or words of another”. It is unethical and, in cases involving creative work, usually illegal. One of the worst sins a communications practitioner may commit is to plagiarize the work of another – to steal his/her words, thought, or outline and pass them off as his/her own.

Duplicating work is defined as submitting the same work to more than one instructor (or publication) without the prior knowledge and agreement of both.

Commission of any of these offenses while in school is grounds for disciplinary action. If the complaint is upheld, a variety of punishments may be imposed, from a reprimand to a lowered or failing grade in the course to dismissal from the university.

### **Student Accessibility Services**

University policy 3342-3-01.3 requires that students with disabilities be provided reasonable accommodations to ensure their equal access to course content. If you have a documented disability and require accommodations, please contact the instructor at the beginning of the semester to make arrangements for necessary classroom adjustments. Please note, you must first verify your eligibility for these through Student Accessibility Services (contact 330-672-3391 or visit [www.kent.edu/sas](http://www.kent.edu/sas) for more information on registration procedures).

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Schedule - scroll down

# Tentative Schedule

NOTE: THIS SCHEDULE IS SUBJECT TO CHANGE AND WILL CHANGE.  
IF YOU MISS CLASS, IT IS **YOUR RESPONSIBILITY** TO CHECK FOR ANY  
AND ALL ASSIGNMENTS.

## Week of January 18

- Class 1** Importance of Data  
Sign up: Climate Change  
Assignment: Climate Change Reporting Project  
Make sure you have ordered the books.  
Grad meeting
- Class 2** **ISIS sign in check**  
Assignment review - what records should be there?  
Planning your calls - Climate Change  
PDF v Word  
Kent Course Case
- Reporters' Committee - State Records Law  
Read Chapters 1 & 2 Houston

## Week of January 25

- Class 1** Blogspot  
Calendar reminders: McGruder  
Assignment: Read Access With Attitude – chapters 1-6
- Class 2** Climate Change Blog  
**Assignment: Story Proposal (*your proposal will be recorded*)**

## Week of February 1

- Class 1** Excel Introduction  
Interface  
basic math in Excel SUMS  
Assignment: Read Houston chapters on EXCEL
- Excel Project – Groups - TBD  
H1b; Dangerous Dams  
Data – Dept of Health, DOT, OSHA, EPA, Census

**Class 2      Videoskype speaker – TheFire.org (tentative)**

**Week of February 8**

**Class 1**      Excel – Calculating Median/Mean  
Writing the Public Records Request (make sure you've read chapters 1-6 – Access with Attitude)

**Class 2**      **Assignment CAR Profile**  
Profile example review  
Excel – outliers  
Percentage  
Parts of a Sum Calculating Median/Mean/Average

**Week of February 15**

**Class 1**      **Story proposal presentations; written proposals due.**  
Each student will be making a story proposal - think of this as an editorial meeting. You're pitching a story you want your news manager to approve. **THESE PITCHES WILL BE RECORDED ON CAMERA.**

**Class 2**      EXCEL PROJECT Data Review  
Make sure your spreadsheet is complete. You'll have time in class to copy and paste.

**Week of February 22**

**Class 1**      Story Proposal Review  
Excel Charts  
Videoskype - TBD

**Class 2**      Story Pitches Revision – in-class  
Reporting Protocol Assessment

**Week of February 29**

**Class 1**      IRE - scouting for stories  
Interviewing - Anticipation

**Class 2**      **Excel Projects Due/Review** (depending on how we're proceeding this deadline may get pushed)

### Week of March 7

**Class 1**      **Midterm Exam** (Excel, Public Records, Reporting Protocol)  
Depending on how we're doing, this date may change.

**Class 2**      Intro to Microsoft Access  
Final Project Possibilities

### Week of March 14

**Class 1**      Access running queries

**Class 2**      Access linking databases  
**Final Project Proposals due – this is on camera.**  
Note: Your proposal is NOT just an idea. You need facts to support your proposal. You have to be going after a story that can be produced. Do NOT delay in conducting your initial research.

### Week of March 21      **spring break**

**Class 1**

**Class 2**

### Week of March 28

**Class 1**      Timed research – getting a copy – prisoner demographics by state. Pick a state, get the data.

**Class 2**      Exploratory Phone Calls – finding what data, records and stories are there.  
Story development – are you doing it?  
**CAR Profile due.**

### Week of April 4

**Class 1**      Profile Review  
Leads  
How does it read/play?

**Class 2**      Access - Building a Database

**Week of April 11**

- Class 1** In-class deadline writing report  
Assistant Salaries
- Class 2** Assistant Salary review  
Sending data/charts prior to the interview

**Week of April 18**

- Class 1** Final Project update  
Access - finding local stories from national data  
H1B, RR, FARS, Pipeline Incidents, Bridges, FAA
- Class 2** Videoskype guest lecture

**Week of April 25**

- Class 1** Misuse of data  
MediaMatters
- Class 2** Final Project Update

**Week of May 2**

- Class 1** **Final Project Due**
- Class 2** **Final Project Reviews**

**Week of May 9 - Final Exams**

12:30 p.m.

12:45 - 3:00 p.m.

Thur.

May 12

**###**



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