

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY EDWARDSVILLE

Syllabus for MC 451 – Spring 2026 Research Methods in Mass Media

Instructor Information

Name: Dr. Alex P. Leith

Email: aleith@siue.edu

Office Hours: MW 10:00-11:30 and 13:30-15:00

Office Location: Dunham Hall 1017

Course Information

Class time: MW 15:00-16:15

Classroom: Dunham Hall 2039

Course Duration: Jan 12 – May 08, 2025



Teaching Philosophy

My teaching philosophy is grounded in constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes active student engagement and reflection as key to constructing knowledge. I am committed to creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment that accommodates diverse learning needs and fosters student success. This philosophy guides my approach to teaching, in which I focus on providing practical skills and conceptual frameworks that enable students to navigate and succeed in the ever-evolving field of mass communication. I integrate technology into my teaching to ensure that students are equipped with the most current tools and practices, and I continually adapt my methods in response to student feedback to maintain educational excellence.

Communicating with the instructor

In addition to class or in-person office hours, I am available electronically via three methods.

- Email: aleith@siue.edu
 - Preferred method for time-insensitive and confidential communication.
- Discord: [APLeith](#)
 - Preferred method for time-sensitive or casual communication.
- Teams: [Bookings](#)
 - Schedule short and medium-length meetings with me.

About the Course

Course Description

MC 451—Research Methods in Mass Media is a comprehensive course that introduces students to core research methodologies used in mass communication. Through this course, students will explore various quantitative and qualitative research methods, including surveys, experimental designs, content analysis, and in-depth interviews. The course emphasizes the development of skills necessary for the design, execution, and presentation of research studies. Students will also engage with the professional and ethical principles that guide mass communication research, fostering a deep understanding of how to critically evaluate and contribute to the field.

Course Objectives

By the end of this course, students will:

- **Understand and apply the principles and laws of freedom of speech and press**, particularly within the context of the United States, while also gaining a global perspective on freedom of expression, including the right to dissent, monitor power, and petition for redress of grievances.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the historical role of professionals and institutions in shaping mass communications and critically evaluate their impact on the development of media systems.
- **Recognize and analyze the impact of diversity in mass communications**, including but not limited to gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, within both domestic and global contexts, and appreciate the significance of this diversity in shaping media content and audience reception.
- **Apply ethical principles in conducting and presenting research**, ensuring that all research practices adhere to standards of truth, accuracy, fairness, and respect for diversity.
- **Think critically, creatively, and independently** in the design and execution of research projects, enabling the development of robust research questions and applying appropriate methodologies.
- **Conduct rigorous research and evaluate information using appropriate methods**, and effectively communicate research findings clearly, concisely, and ethically responsibly.

Course Goals:

- Equip students with the ability to engage with mass communication research critically, ensuring they can both conduct independent study and critically assess the research of others.
- Foster an appreciation for the role of mass communications in reflecting and shaping societal values, particularly concerning diverse populations.
- Prepare students to apply digital tools and technologies in their research, enabling them to navigate and contribute to the evolving landscape of mass media research.
- Develop students' ability to communicate research findings effectively to both academic and non-academic audiences, using appropriate forms and styles.

Course textbooks

The book for this course is an OER textbook hosted through GitHub. Please bookmark this textbook. Additional readings will be posted on Blackboard as needed.

- <https://sim-lab-siue.github.io/research-methods>
- Additional readings posted to Blackboard.

Other course materials

Software

This class uses various software to collect, analyze, and visualize data. The software will be available on the classroom computers; however, it is beneficial also to install it on your personal computer to gain experience.

- R: A free software environment for statistical computing and graphics. It compiles and runs on a wide variety of UNIX platforms, Windows, and macOS.
- RStudio: An integrated development environment (IDE) for R and Python. RStudio runs on the desktop (Windows, Mac, and Linux).
- GitHub Desktop
- Quarto
- Git

Hardware

You are expected to have access to a computer that adheres to the SIUE Mass Communications [recommended laptop requirements](#). Even if the classroom has computers available, you will likely need to acquire access to a personal computer to complete all coursework. File management is also essential for this course. You will have access to GitHub for version control; however, I also recommend saving everything to your personal computer and a secondary system. The secondary system can be either an external storage device (e.g., USB, HDD, or SSD drive) or a cloud drive (e.g., OneDrive, Dropbox, or Google Drive), so you can limit data loss. You are unlikely to be accessing large amounts of data, so a 16GB jump drive with USB 2 or higher should be sufficient. I believe an upgrade to USB 3.0 or higher is worth the few extra dollars.

Course Requirements

Course activities/assessments

All course activities are intended to prepare you for the final paper and presentation. This will include selecting a topic, analytical exercises, and writing.

Submitting work

Submissions will always be done through Blackboard. Please review assignment instructions to ensure you submit files in the correct format.

Technology requirements

Technical requirements for students are available in this [ITS KnowledgeBase article](#).

Course Policies and University Policies

Academic integrity/plagiarism

Students are reminded that the expectations and academic standards outlined in the [Student Academic Code \(3C2\)](#) apply to all courses, field experiences and educational experiences at the University, regardless of modality or location.

Plagiarism is using another person's words or ideas without crediting that person. Per the [SIUE academic dishonesty policy](#), plagiarism and cheating will not be tolerated and may lead to failure on an assignment, in class, or dismissal from the University. Students are responsible for complying with University policies on academic honesty, as set out in the [University's Student Academic Conduct Code](#).

Diversity and Inclusion

SIUE is always committed to respecting everyone's dignity. To learn, exchange ideas, and support one another, our virtual and physical classrooms must be places where students and teachers feel safe and supported. Systems of oppression permeate our institutions and our classrooms. All students and faculty have the responsibility to co-create a classroom that affirms inclusion, equity, and social justice, where racism, sexism, classism, ableism, heterosexism, xenophobia, and other social pathologies are not tolerated. Violations of this policy will be enforced in line with the SIUE Student Conduct Code.

The [Inclusive Excellence, Education, and Development Hub](#) is an excellent resource for students for support and community. Any person who believes they have experienced or witnessed discrimination, or harassment can contact Lindy Wagner, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Inclusive Excellence, Education and Development at (618) 650-3179 or linwagn@siue.edu.

Pregnancy and Newly Parenting Policy

This policy and procedure are established to ensure the protection and equal treatment of pregnant students, students with pregnancy-related medical conditions, including as a result of the termination of pregnancy, and students who become new parents, including parents adopting or fostering to adopt for the first 12 weeks a child is in the home, following Federal and State guidelines and regulations. "New Parents" refers to a parent who has recently welcomed a newborn or adopted a child or is fostering to adopt a child and needs support to mitigate the disruption in academic progress within the first 12 weeks of parenting or a parent that needs support due to medical necessity attributed to pregnancy or delivery of a child; care of newborn; or lactation within the first year of child's life or legal adoption/fostering. Visit [Policies & Procedures - Student Rights and Conduct - Newly Parenting Policy - 3C15](#) to view the full policy and learn how to request accommodations through the Office of Equal Opportunity, Access, and Title IX Coordination (EOA).

Technology Privacy Information

We will be using Blackboard in this course. Please review the [Anthology Blackboard Privacy Statement](#) to learn how your data is being used and stored.

Additional Support

Services for Students Needing Accommodations

It is the policy and practice of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville to create inclusive learning environments. If there are aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in barriers to your inclusion or to accurate assessment of achievements such as time-limited exams, inaccessible web content or the use of non-captioned videos, please contact Accessible Campus Community and Equitable Student Support (ACCESS) as soon as possible. To determine reasonable accommodations, students must register with ACCESS either online at siue.edu/access or in person at the Student Success Center, Room 1203. You can also reach the office by emailing us at myaccess@siue.edu or by calling [618-650-3726](tel:618-650-3726).

If you anticipate needing additional assistance in an emergency, please notify your instructor to be shown the evacuation route and to discuss your specific needs.

Academic and Other Student Services

As an enrolled SIUE student, you have a variety of support available to you, including:

- [Lovejoy Library Resources](#)
- [Academic Success Sessions](#)
- [Tutoring Resource Center](#)
- [The Writing Center](#)
- [Academic Advising](#)
- [Financial Aid](#)
- [Campus Events](#)
- [Counseling Services](#)

If you find that you need additional support, please reach out to me and let me know.

Cougar Care

Dealing with the fast-paced life of a college student can be challenging, and I always support a student's decisions to prioritize mental health. Students have access to counseling services on campus (Student Success Center, 0222). Make an appointment by visiting cougarcare.siue.edu or by calling [618-650-2842](tel:618-650-2842).

Student Success Coaches

Student success coaches work across campus to serve the SIUE student population by providing the tools and resources needed to adapt to and meet the demands of the college experience. Success coaches provide direct services, such as time-management support and referrals to campus resources. If you find yourself in need of academic or personal support or in a situation that is preventing you from being successful in the classroom, please utilize Starfish to connect with a coach as soon as possible. The sooner you engage, the sooner you can access the information or tools you need to get back on track.

Technical Support

Since this is a computer-based course, you are expected to have reliable computer and Internet access on a regular basis. It is your responsibility to address any computer problems that might occur. Such problems are not an excuse for delays in meeting expectations or for missing course deadlines.

Contact ITS at [618-650-5500](tel:618-650-5500) or at help@siue.edu with any technical concerns. You can also check the functionality of University systems, including Blackboard, at the ITS System Status page, or search the ITS KnowledgeBase for various how-to and troubleshooting guides.

Tips for taking online assessments:

- Set up a wired (Ethernet) Internet connection on your computer
- Do not use a mobile device, such as a phone or tablet
- Read the instructions and directions carefully
- Be prepared to complete the assessment in the allotted time

Assignments

Phase I: The Journalist (150 pts)

Weekly Reading Journal (150 points)

Post a weekly 250–300-word reflection on the assigned reading. Draft your entry in Obsidian to build your personal archive, then copy it to your GitHub repository for submission.

Phase II: The Architect (125 pts)

GitHub Profile (25 points)

Create a public GitHub profile with a professional photo and a README.md that introduces yourself and outlines your research interests.

Syllabus Contract (25 points)

Open the provided Quarto template in RStudio, sign your name (handwritten image), and click "Render" to generate a PDF. This confirms your software is correctly installed.

Project Setup (25 points)

Submit a screenshot showing your "Digital Office" structure: your Obsidian Vault folders side by side with your RStudio Project files, formatted according to the course guide.

Archivist Report (50 points)

Identify a media archive (e.g., Nexis Uni, Social Data). Draft a brief report in Obsidian summarizing the source and date range, then render it to PDF using RStudio.

Phase III: The Builder (250 pts)

Annotated Manuscript (25 points)

Using Zotero, select one peer-reviewed article relevant to your theory. Highlight key variables, add margin notes, and submit the exported PDF.

Project Prospectus (25 points)

Submit a one-page "Roadmap" identifying your chosen Topic, Theory, and Media Source. Draft in Obsidian; render to PDF in RStudio.

Topic Selection (25 points)

Based on initial listening, submit two formalized Research Questions (RQs) that guide your inquiry (e.g., "How does Source X frame Topic Y?").

Definitions Practice (25 points)

Create a Markdown table in Obsidian defining four variables. You must include both the *Conceptual Definition* (dictionary) and the *Operational Definition* (how you measure it).

Codebook & Qual Memo (50 points)

Submit your "Rulebook" for analysis. This PDF must list all variables, their categories, and the specific rules for coding content. Generated via Quarto.

Sampling Plan & Pilot (100 points)

Submit a "Methodology Protocol" that defines your exact search terms and date range. You must also test your codebook on 10 items and report on reliability.

Phase IV: The Analyst (225 pts)

Data Wrangling [R] (50 points)

Import your raw coding data (CSV) into RStudio. Use the provided script to clean column names and format factors. Submit the cleaned .RDS file.

Describing Data [R] (75 points)

Generate the "Executive Summary" visualizations using R. Produce and interpret a frequency table and a bar chart for your primary variables.

Inferencing Data [R] (100 points)

Run a Chi-Square test in R to analyze the relationship between two variables. Explain the statistical significance (p-value) in plain English.

Phase V: The Publisher (250 pts)

Final Web Portfolio (250 points)

Submit a unified professional report (Intro, Method, Results, Discussion). You must render this document as both a formal PDF and a live GitHub Pages website.

Grading Scale

A = 1000-900; B = 899-800; C = 799-700; D = 699-600; F = < 599

Grading Deadline

Unless otherwise stated, the deadline for all assignments is Friday by the end of the day (11:59 p.m.).

Grading Rubric[s]

Grading rubrics are presented as checklists. You will start at full credit and then lose full or partial points for each incorrect item. The checklist will ask you to complete specific tasks and explain how you accomplished them. You are also welcome to contact me with any point disputes. In special cases, you can also address mistakes for partial credit.

Feedback and Grading Timeline

I hope to post grades with itemized feedback by the Monday following the due date. You can find your grade by clicking the My Grades link on the left menu of the Blackboard course. The itemized feedback is intended to point you to the erred point. Please get in touch with me for any additional clarity.

Late or Missed Assignments

Late submissions (after Friday at 11:59 pm) will be docked 10% of the assignment grade per business day late. Non-emergency extensions must be requested prior to the deadline.

Resubmission

You may revise and resubmit any assignment worth 50 points or more for a new grade, averaged with your original. This must occur within one week of the original due date.

- Assignments turned in late (after Friday at 11:59 pm) but before the following Monday (or Tuesday, if a holiday) will receive a maximum grade of 75%.
- Assignments submitted more than one weekday late without prior approval will receive a 0.
- All writing assignments can be resubmitted up to one week after the initial due date for an average of your two grades. Below are two examples:
 - An initial grade of 60% and a resubmission of 80% will result in a grade of 70%.
 - An initial submission of 0% and a resubmission of 100% will result in a grade of 50%.

Participation

This course works best with the respectful exchange of ideas, including being sensitive to the views and beliefs expressed during online discussions. Success in this course is closely linked to attendance and participation (e.g., asking questions, participating in activities). I also recommend self-study to ensure the retention of these new skills.

Regular and Substantive Interaction

Regular and substantive interaction (RSI) is required as part of new US Department of Education regulations for distance (online) education and it supports student learning in all learning environments (online, face-to-face, hybrid, hyflex, etc.). SIUE faculty participate in RSI by initiating frequent and timely opportunities to engage with students. RSI may look different in every class because there are several ways to implement RSI, such as facilitating online discussions, scheduling a Zoom conference with a student, or holding regularly scheduled review sessions before tests. To learn more about RSI, use the Online Tips links for Faculty and Students in your Blackboard course websites or visit the [Faculty Resources for Regular and Substantive Interaction webpage](#).

Recordings of Class Content

To assist with accessibility, I have begun recording course content via Zoom. These recordings will be available through links on Blackboard. These recordings are not an excuse to miss class, as attendance will still be taken.

Diversity and Inclusion

SIUE is always committed to respecting everyone's dignity. To learn, exchange ideas, and support one another, our virtual and physical classrooms must be places where students and teachers feel safe and

supported. Systems of oppression permeate our institutions and our classrooms. All students and faculty have the responsibility to co-create a classroom that affirms inclusion, equity, and social justice, where racism, sexism, classism, ableism, heterosexism, xenophobia, and other social pathologies are not tolerated. Violations of this policy will be enforced in line with the SIUE Student Conduct Code.

Subject to change notice

All material, assignments, and deadlines are subject to change with prior notice. It is your responsibility to stay in touch with your instructor, review the course site regularly, or communicate with other students, to adjust as needed if assignments or due dates change.

Course Schedule^{*}:

Dates	Phase / Topic	Assignments Due
Week 01 Jan 12	The Journalist Ch 1: The Science of Storytelling	GitHub Profile
Week 02 Jan 19	The Publisher Ch 2: The Publishing Engine	Syllabus Contract
Week 03 Jan 26	The Scientist Ch 3: The Scientific Approach	Project Setup
Week 04 Feb 02	The Search Ch 4: Intelligence Gathering	Archivist Report
Week 05 Feb 09	The Lens Ch 5: Theory as a Lens	Annotated Manuscript
Week 06 Feb 16	The Architect Ch 6: The Project Brief	Project Prospectus
Week 07 Feb 23	The Translator Ch 7: Structured Listening	Topic Selection (RQs)
Week 08 Mar 02	The Variables Ch 8: From Vibes to Variables	Definitions Practice
Week 09 Mar 09	SPRING BREAK <i>No Readings</i>	
Week 10 Mar 16	The Rulebook Ch 9: The Rulebook	Codebook & Qual Memo
Week 11 Mar 23	The Sample Ch 10: The Sample	Sampling Plan / Pilot
Week 12 Mar 30	Field Work <i>No Reading</i>	
Week 13 Apr 06	The Analyst Ch 11: Wrangling the Data	Data Wrangling [R]
Week 14 Apr 13	The Narrative Ch 12: Visualizing the Narrative	Describing Data [R]
Week 15 Apr 20	The Inference Ch 13: Making the Call	Inferencing Data [R]
Week 16 Apr 27	Remote Assembly Ch 14: The One-Click Report	
Week 17 May 04	Finals Week	Final Web Portfolio

*The schedule is subject to change.