Introduction to Research Methods

Tell me and I forget; teach me and I remember; involve me and I learn

Benjamin Franklin

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Fall 2012—Sec 70
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(please use judiciously, and NO assignments accepted by email)

COURSE DESCRIPTION & OBJECTIVES

Research Methods is an introduction to the theory and practice of social science research. The primary objectives of the course are:

- familiarize students with the different types of methods that are used to accumulate evidence in the social sciences;
- expose students to the logic of data analysis;
- give students an opportunity to conduct their own research and to critique existing social science research;
- aid students in developing their skills in formal, scientific writing;
- offer students experience in both oral and written presentation of original work.

Group discussions, analysis exercises, sociological research and individual presentations will be used to achieve these learning objectives. The course will culminate in a student conference in which each student will present and discuss the results of his/her own research project.

COURSE OVERVIEW

Required Texts

Grading

| Project Preliminaries | 20%
| Academic Journal Evaluations | 20%
| Research Project Proposal | 40%
| Attend/Participation/Presentations | 20%

Special Accommodations
The University of Utah seeks to provide equal access to its programs, services and activities for people with disabilities. If you need accommodations in the class, reasonable prior notice needs to be given to the Center for Disability Services (CDS), 162 Olpin Union Building, 581-5020 (V/TDD). CDS will work with you and the instructor to make arrangements for accommodations. All written information in this course can be made available in alternative format with prior notification to the Center for Disability Services. Please discuss any concerns with the professor as soon as possible.

Grading Criterion

A An excellent work in all or nearly all aspects of the assignment. The student exemplifies originality of ideas, superior depth of thought, and extensive grasp of topics as well as technical superiority.
B A competent work with a lapse here or there. Ideas are clear and properly expressed; the writing is technically solid. The assignment is effective in meeting all criteria but does not rise to distinction.
C An adequate work, but not good. Student ideas tend to be oversimplified, reductionistic, and lack sufficient explanation or exploration. Problems may also exist with grammar, logic, or ability to express thoughts in a manner reflective of a junior level class.
D A minimal effort by the student—the work is marred by problems with almost all aspects of the assignment. This is not considered a competent performance.
E A failing mark, generally reserved for assignments which are not submitted or miss the target on virtually every criteria of the project.

+/- Plus or minus may be given in addition to each of the grade levels when deemed appropriate.
PARTICIPATION (20% of course grade)

Given the “hands-on” nature of this course, regular attendance is strongly encouraged. Active participation is also expected. This class will be conducted in a Socratic format with emphasis on professor and student interaction and understanding through questions and comments. The professor will use this forum to present key concepts not detailed in the major texts under consideration. The Socratic model is employed to encourage analysis, critical thinking, preparation, and long term learning on the part of the student. Each should come prepared to discuss the subject scheduled on the calendar. Note cards will be marked for every student, and response notes will be given based on the quality of comments offered: + (plus), √ (check), √- (check minus), - (minus), or 0 (zero)—representing roughly the grades of A, B, C, D, and E.

ACADEMIC JOURNAL EVALUATIONS (20% of course grade)

One of the key aspects of understanding social research method is the direct application of principles to existing scholarly work as exemplified in current academic journals. During the course of the semester, students will choose two articles from any current social science journal (preferably articles they are using for their project paper) and evaluate these according to the criteria learned in the course and through the required texts. Each of the evaluations will count 10% of the course grade, or 20% for the total. The format will be distributed by the professor. NOTE: Evaluations due 7 & 14 November.

RESEARCH PROJECT PRELIMINARIES (20% of course grade)

The research project/class presentation is an exercise that will acquaint students with many elements involved in conducting social science research from beginning to completion. As you develop the project you will go through several steps that are building blocks. Each involves a cumulative piece of the project, beginning with elementary problem identification and moving to the two final pieces: the written report and oral presentation. The style guide of the American Psychological Association (APA) will be the format of this project.

(1) Topic approval—Submit a one paragraph statement on a topic of interest as the subject of your non-reactive data research, explaining what the topic is and why it is important enough to be researched. This topic will be approved or modified as the semester progresses. A thorough discussion will be conducted in class concerning successful completion of the research project before the topic approval is due. NOTE: The working topic is due 19 Sept.

2) Working literature review/bibliography—Researchers always begin a study by looking at what else has been done on that topic. So, after the topic has been approved, immediately begin work finding at least six peer-reviewed social science journal articles on that subject. The list should be in a standard format for bibliographic references (for a sample format of sources see the Bibliography in the Schutt text.). To begin, see Sociology Research Guide (www.lib.utah.edu/ResGuides/sociology.html). NOTE: Working bibliography due 3 Oct.

(3) Annotated bibliography—After researchers find reputable references to their research, they read this information in order to learn what else is known about the subject of their research. The annotated bibliography consists of short summaries of each of the references appearing on your working bibliography. The short summaries should not quote or paraphrase the published abstract for the article, but should include:
   ♦ short descriptions of the author’s objectives (major question(s) the author was seeking to illuminate),
   ♦ a description of the nature of the data on which the conclusions were based (survey data, qualitative data, case studies, comparative historical studies, experiments, etc.);
   ♦ a description of how the data were gathered (face-to-face interviews, participant observation, quantitative analysis, etc.) and the nature of the cases studied, or the sample;
   ♦ a short summary of what the author(s) concluded. NOTE: The annotated bibliography is due 24 Oct.

(4) Mini-proposal—Once researchers learn what is already known about their subject and create a bibliography, they write a research proposal. Proposals are used to gain clearance to proceed with research. Authorization typically issues from funding agencies, committees that safeguard human subjects, and others, such as faculty advisors. You will write a very brief version, or mini-proposal. The mini-proposal will be 3-4 pages in length, and it will contain the following elements in this order:
   (1) statement of the subject of the proposal, including why it is important;
   (2) overview of what is known about the subject, including the literature review—based on the references;
   (3) working hypotheses (both null and working) which would facilitate the investigation of this topic;
   (4) listing and defining the key concepts, constructs and variables;
   (5) identifying possible non-reactive data to be collected and why;
   (6) likely operationalization (or measurement) of the key concepts;
   (7) probable population, sample size and description;
   (8) probable methods of data collection;
   (9) possible ethical considerations (if any);
   (10) desired results. NOTE: The mini-proposal is due 31 Oct.
RESEARCH PROJECT (40% of course grade)

Students will design and conduct a research project. The project includes choosing a unique research topic, designing an appropriate study using non-reactive data, including specifying testable hypotheses, designing an appropriate data collection plan, and specifying an appropriate sampling strategy. The result will be a research paper presented to the class near the end of the semester and submitted in writing. Written reports will follow the standard format of a published research article. The report should be approximately 8 to 12 double-spaced pages of text. Each student will present the results of their research project during the “student conference” at the end of the semester. The formal presentation will be about 10 minutes, with approximately 5 minutes of question and answer from the audience. Presentations should be both creative and professional. Final project papers will include a completed version of the mini-proposal with all elements in place reporting the student’s findings in their research, as follows:

1. abstract;
2. the literature review—based on the references;
3. statement on how you propose to study the subject;
4. hypotheses (both null and working);
5. listing and defining the key concepts;
6. identifying data collected;
7. operationalization (or measure) of the key concepts;
8. population studied;
9. sample size and description;
10. methods of data collection;
11. ethical considerations (if any);
12. results;
13. limitations of study;
14. future work to be done.

NOTE: Final project due 5 December

COURSE CALENDAR

22 Aug  Introduction to course material; presentation of syllabus

29 Aug  Science, society, and social research;
The process and problems of social research
        Schutt—Chpts 1 & 2

5 Sept  Background for evaluating research reports;
        Evaluating titles;
        Evaluating abstracts
        Pyrczak—Chpts 1, 2 & 3

12 Sept Research ethics and philosophies;
        Successful completion of the Research Project and distribution of sample papers
        Schutt—Chpt 3

19 Sept Summarizing and reporting research;---------------------WORKING TOPIC DUE!
        Research article information
        Schutt—Chpt 15
        Schutt—Appendix A, B, C, D
        Evaluating introductions and literature reviews;
        A closer look at evaluating literature reviews
        Pyrczak—Chpts 4 & 5

26 Sept  Conceptualizing & measurement;
        Sampling
        Schutt—Chpts 4 & 5
3 Oct  
Research design & causation;----------------------------- **WORKING BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE!** 
Experiments  
**Schutt—Chpts 6 & 7** 
Evaluating samples when researchers generalize; 
Evaluating samples when researchers do not generalize  
**Pyrczak—Chpts 6 & 7**

10 Oct  
**FALL BREAK—NO CLASS!!**

17 Oct  
Secondary data analysis and content analysis (Unobtrusive Research)  
**Schutt—Chpt 13** 
Evaluating instrumentation  
**Pyrczak—Chpt 8**

24 Oct  
Survey research------------------------------- **ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE!**  
**Schutt—Chpt 8** 
Evaluating analysis and results sections: quantitative research;  
**Pyrczak—Chpt 10**

31 Oct  
Qualitative methods------------------------------- **MINI-PROPOSAL DUE!**  
Qualitative data analysis  
**Schutt—Chpts 9 & 10** 
Evaluating analysis and results sections: qualitative research; 
Evaluating discussion sections  
**Pyrczak—Chpts 11 & 13**

7 Nov  
Evaluation and policy research-------------------------- **JOURNAL ARTICLE EVALUATION 1 DUE!**  
Historical and comparative research  
**Schutt—Chpts 11 & 12** 
Putting it all together  
**Pyrczak—Chpt 13**

14 Nov  
Quantitative data analysis------------------------------- **JOURNAL ARTICLE EVALUATION 2 DUE!**  
**Schutt—Chpt 14**

21 Nov  
Finalizing the research project—Library/computer lab

28 Nov  
**RESEARCH CONFERENCE—PRESENTATION TO CLASS**

5 Dec  
**RESEARCH CONFERENCE/RESEARCH PROJECT DUE!**

**NOTE:**  Those who wish their grades mailed to them should attach a legal size, peel & stick, self-addressed, stamped envelope with their final paper.

**That's All, Folks! Have a great holiday!**