

# JRN 3014: COMPUTER-ASSISTED REPORTING

*Spring 2026*

(3 Units)

Tuesdays & Thursdays | 11:00-12:15 p.m.

Bond 105-A

*Instructor:*

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## PLNU Mission

### To Teach ~ To Shape ~ To Send

Point Loma Nazarene University exists to provide higher education in a vital Christian community where minds are engaged and challenged, character is modeled and formed, and service is an expression of faith. Being of Wesleyan heritage, we strive to be a learning community where grace is foundational, truth is pursued, and holiness is a way of life.

## Course Description

This course introduces students to data/investigative journalism through hands-on laboratory work, including advanced web research, public records requests, statistical analysis, databases, mapping, visual aids, and data interactives. Students will learn to acquire, clean, analyze, and present data to tell compelling and accurate stories. **Prerequisite:** JRN 2050.

## Course Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- Develop investigative story ideas focused on public accountability.
- Find and evaluate documents, records, and other primary sources.
- Use public records laws (FOIA/PRA) to request and obtain information.

- Analyze documents and data to verify facts and identify patterns.
- Write clear, accurate investigative stories based on evidence.
- Apply ethical standards related to fairness, transparency, and privacy.

## Required Resources

- Laptop and access to spreadsheet software (e.g., Excel or Google Sheets) and free visualization tools (e.g., [OpenRefine](#), [Tableau](#), [Datawrapper](#)).
- Free student registration to the New York Times All Access. [Link to registration instructions](#). Note: Students will be required to monitor one legacy national media source or local media outlet during the semester.
- Student membership to Investigative Reporters & Editors ([IRE.org](#)). Contact the instructor if the \$25 fee is a barrier.
- Course materials, readings and resources provided on Canvas.

## Recommended Study Resources

No textbook is required, but the following resources may be helpful:

- Mike Reilley and Samantha Sunne, *Data Journalism: A Story-Driven Approach* (2023)
- Brant Houston, *Investigative Reporter's Handbook* (2020)
- Sarah Cohen, *Numbers in the Newsroom* (2014), IRE

## Course Schedule

This schedule is subject to change to accommodate guest speakers.

### WEEK 1: Course Orientation

**Tues, Jan 13** – Course welcome; syllabus; what is investigative journalism?

**Thurs, Jan 15** – What is Computer-Assisted Reporting/data journalism? Overview, history, examples, best practices.

**Due:** Personal bio discussion post.

### WEEK 2: Finding Stories/Beginning Investigations

**Tues, Jan 20** – What makes a story worth investigating?

**Thurs, Jan 22** – The investigative process

### WEEK 3: Backgrounding & Research Fundamentals

**Tues, Jan 27** – Advanced web research & deep searches

**Thurs, Jan 29** – Research memos; organizing findings

### WEEK 4: Investigating Individuals I

**Tues, Feb 3** – Vital records, property records, professional licenses

**Thurs, Feb 5** – Criminal and civil court basics

## **WEEK 5: Investigating Individuals II**

**Tues, Feb 10** – Building profiles; linking people to institutions

**Thurs, Feb 12** – Ethics, verification, and responsible use of personal records

## **WEEK 6: Investigating Institutions**

**Tues, Feb 17** – Government agencies, nonprofits, corporations

**Thurs, Feb 19** – Tools for investigating private entities

## **WEEK 7: Writer's Symposium by the Sea**

**Monday, February 23 - Friday, February 27**

- Symposium replaces regular class activities
- Students attend required sessions and participate in discussions.

**Due:** Background Profile

## **WEEK 8: Public Records & Open Government**

**Tues, Mar 3** – FOIA and state public records laws

**Thurs, Mar 5** – Drafting and submitting effective public records requests

**Due:** Public Records Request

## **WEEK 9: Introduction to Data for Investigations**

**Tues, Mar 10** – What data is; finding datasets

**Thurs, Mar 12** – Connecting records, documents, and data

## **WEEK 10: Spring Break (No Classes)**

**Mon-Fri, Mar 9-13**

## **WEEK 11: Numeracy & Spreadsheets for Journalists**

**Tues, Mar 24** – Percentages, rates, averages; writing with numbers

**Thurs, Mar 26** – Spreadsheet basics: importing, sorting, filtering, cleaning

## **WEEK 12: Spreadsheets II: Finding Patterns**

**Tues, Mar 31** – Pivot tables and grouping data

**Easter Recess (No Classes) Apr 2-6**

**WEEK 13: Data Analysis, Visualization & Transparency**

Tues, Apr 7 – Testing investigative hypotheses with data

Thurs, Apr 9 – Charts, maps, publishing, and transparency tools

## WEEK 14: Pitching your story

Tues, Apr 14 – How to craft an investigative story pitch

Thurs, Apr 16 – Pitch workshop / peer feedback (TBA)

## WEEK 15: Publishing Workshop

Tues, Apr 21 – Writing, editing, and polishing your story

Thurs, Apr 23 – Visual aids and interactives: presenting stories compellingly

## WEEK 16: Student Presentations

Apr 28 & 30: Student presentations of final projects; course reflections and final feedback.

## WEEK 17: Finals Week (May 5-9)

Due: Final Investigative Project and Final Project Log

### Assignments & Grading

- **Weekly Reporting Exercises (25%):** Short, hands-on reporting and writing exercises (50 points)
- **Public Records Request (10%):** Draft and submit a public records request. (20 points)
- **Background Profile (15%):** A reported background profile of an individual, institution, or organization relevant to your final investigation. (30 points)
- **Final Project (30%):** A fully developed investigative story using data and public records. (60 points)
- **Final Project Log (10%):** Record of the steps taken to complete your project. (20 points)
- **Participation (10%):** Active engagement in class discussions, workshops and reporting activities. (20 points)

Total: 100% (200 points)

### Grading Scale

A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-
93-100	90-92	87-89	83-86	80-82	77-79	73-76	70-72	67-69	63-66	60-62

## Incompletes and Late Assignments

All assignments are to be submitted/turned in by the beginning of the class session when they are due—including assignments posted in Canvas. Incompletes will only be assigned in extremely unusual circumstances. Revisions will be allowed in almost all cases, but don't miss a deadline!

## PLNU Academic Honesty Policy

Students should demonstrate academic honesty by doing original work and by giving appropriate credit to the ideas of others. Academic dishonesty is the act of presenting information, ideas, and/or concepts as one's own when in reality they are the results of another person's creativity and effort. A faculty member who believes a situation involving academic dishonesty has been detected may assign a failing grade for that assignment or examination, or, depending on the seriousness of the offense, for the course. For all student appeals, faculty and students should follow the procedures outlined in the University Catalog. See [Academic Policies](#) for definitions of kinds of academic dishonesty and for further policy information.

## Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy

You are allowed to use Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Gemini Pro 1.5, GrammarlyGo, Perplexity, etc.) to parse data, or correct grammar in this course, but you are not allowed to use AI tools to generate content (text, video, audio) that will end up in any work intended for publication that will be submitted to be graded for this course, unless authorized in advance by the instructor. Any work that utilizes AI-based tools must be clearly identified as such, including the specific tool(s) used. Please use the following sources to guide your citations when using AI.

[APA Style: How to Cite ChatGPT](#)

## PLNU Attendance and Participation Policy

Regular and punctual attendance at all class sessions is considered essential to optimum academic achievement. If the student is absent for more than 10 percent of class sessions, the faculty member will issue a written warning of de-enrollment. If the absences exceed 20 percent, the student may be de-enrolled without notice until the university withdrawal date or, after that date, receive an "F" grade.

## Content Warning

I acknowledge that each of you comes to PLNU with your own unique life experiences. This contributes to the way you perceive various types of information. In JRN 3014, all of the class content, including that which may be intellectually or emotionally challenging, has been intentionally curated to achieve the learning goals for this course. The decision to include such material is not taken lightly. These topics include violence, abuse and injustice. If you encounter a topic that is intellectually challenging for you, it can manifest in feelings of discomfort and upset. In response, I encourage you to come talk to me or your friends or family about it. Class topics are discussed for the sole purpose of expanding your intellectual engagement in the area of journalism, and I will support you throughout your learning in this course.

Email and text are the best ways to reach me. Office hours are Tuesdays, 2-4 p.m. and by appointment. Feel free to contact me for additional guidance or feedback on your assignments.