

Department of Literature, Journalism, Writing, and Languages

JRN 3014: COMPUTER-ASSISTED REPORTING

Spring 2025

(3 Units)

Tuesdays & Thursdays | 3:00 - 4:15 p.m.

Cabrillo 101

Final Exam: (Tuesday 5/6, 4:30-7:00 p.m.)

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.

“In its simplest definition, data journalism is the practice of using numbers and trends to tell a story.” — Betsy Ladyzhets, [*Interrogating data: A science writer's guide to data journalism*](#), *The Open Notebook*

Course Learning Outcomes

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

- Find answers to questions in data and public records.
- Do online and offline research to obtain documents and acquire data.
- Understand and use public record laws to negotiate access using FOIA/PRA.
- Write clear and accurate stories using data and on-ground reporting.
- Apply ethical standards to data and investigative journalism, including transparency, accountability, and respect for privacy.

Required Resources

- Laptop and access to spreadsheet software (e.g., Excel or Google Sheets) and free visualization tools (e.g., Tableau, Datawrapper).
- Course materials, readings and resources provided on Canvas.
- In lieu of a textbook I recommend a \$25 student membership to Investigative Reporters & Editors (IRE). Scholarships are available. Contact the instructor if the fee is a barrier.

Recommended Study Resources

While no single text is required for this sequence of lessons, the following list may be useful:

- Reilley, M., & Sunne, S. (2023). *Data journalism: A story-driven approach to learning data reporting* (1st ed.).
- Houston, B. (2019). *Data for journalists: A practical guide for computer-assisted reporting* (5th ed.).
- Cohen, S. (2014). *Numbers in the newsroom: Using math and statistics in news* (2nd ed.). Investigative Reporters and Editors. (Note: this book is \$10 and available from [IRE.org](https://ire.org)).

Course Schedule

This schedule is subject to change.

WEEK 1: Course welcome & orientation

Jan 14: Introductions, syllabus overview, course objectives, and introduction to CAR.

- **Discussion:** Introduce yourself to the class.

Jan 16: What is Computer-Assisted Reporting/data journalism? Overview, history, examples, best practices.

*Content warning: racial violence and injustice will be discussed as part of the historic overview.

WEEK 2: Acquiring data

Jan 21: Finding data through smart searches, portals, and public records requests.

Jan 23: Deep web searches, data aggregators and exploring governmental and non-governmental sources.

WEEK 3: Numeracy: Using math and spreadsheets to “interview” data to answer research questions

Jan 28: Math for journalists: basic calculations, percentages, and averages.

Jan 30: Best practices in data; importing data, sorting and filtering data for patterns and outliers.

WEEK 3: Spreadsheets

Feb 4: Cleaning and standardizing data; using functions.

Feb 6: Grouping data with filters; Using pivot tables to analyze large datasets.

WEEK 5: Guest lecture or special topic

Feb 11: Guest lecturer Danielle Cervantes.

Feb 13: No class. Use this time to work on your data assignment.

WEEK 6: Writing a data story

Feb 18: Crafting a data-driven lead and story structure, presenting your data.

- **Free tools for data analysis and visualization:** [OpenRefine](#), [Tableau](#), [Datawrapper](#).

Feb 20: Ethics, trust, transparency, and posting data online (GitHub basics).

WEEK 7: 30th Annual Writer’s Symposium by the Sea

Feb 25: Data project reviews.

Feb 27: Attend **30th Annual Writer’s Symposium by the Sea** event. Reflect on storytelling techniques.

WEEK 8: Public Records & Open Records Laws

Mar 4: Understanding FOIA, state public records laws, and how to make effective requests.

Mar 6: Hands-on workshop: Drafting and submitting public records requests.

WEEK 9: Spring Break (No Classes)

Mar 11 & Mar 13: No class.

WEEK 10: Beginning Investigations

Mar 18: The investigative process: developing hypotheses, research, and sourcing.

- Guest lecturer Julie Sweeney on premium info sources.

Mar 20: Public records basics: due diligence and verification.

WEEK 11: Investigating Individuals I

Mar 25: Using news clips, social media, and vital records to build profiles.

Mar 27: Workshop: Organizing and synthesizing background material.

WEEK 12: Investigating Individuals II

Apr 1: Accessing criminal and civil case filings, property records, and assets.

Apr 3: Professional networks and links: connecting individuals to organizations.

WEEK 13: Investigating Institutions

Apr 8: Researching government agencies, businesses, and nonprofits.

Apr 10: Tools for institutional investigations: databases and public filings.

WEEK 14: Advanced Topics (TBA)

Apr 15: Guest speaker or special topic (details TBA).

Apr 17: Easter recess (No Class)..

WEEK 15: Publishing Workshop

Apr 22: Workshop: Writing, editing, and polishing your story.

Apr 24: Visual aids and interactives: presenting your story compellingly.

WEEK 16: Student Presentations

Apr 29: Student presentations of final projects.

May 1: Course reflections and final feedback.

WEEK 17: Finals Week (May 5-9)

Assignments & Grading

- **Data/writing Exercises (30%):** Weekly hands-on assignments. (60 points)
- **Public Records Request (20%):** Draft and submit a public records request. (40 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 and workshops. (20 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

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.

Spiritual Care

Please be aware PLNU strives to be a place where you grow as whole persons. To this end, we provide resources for our students to encounter God and grow in their Christian faith.

If you have questions, a desire to meet with the chaplain or have prayer requests you can contact your professor or the [Office of Spiritual Life and Formation](#).

State Authorization

State authorization is a formal determination by a state that Point Loma Nazarene University is approved to conduct activities regulated by that state. In certain states outside California, Point Loma Nazarene University is not authorized to enroll online (distance education) students. If a student moves to another

state after admission to the program and/or enrollment in an online course, continuation within the program and/or course will depend on whether Point Loma Nazarene University is authorized to offer distance education courses in that state. It is the student's responsibility to notify the institution of any change in his or her physical location. Refer to the map on [State Authorization](#) to view which states allow online (distance education) outside of California.

PLNU Copyright Policy

Point Loma Nazarene University, as a non-profit educational institution, is entitled by law to use materials protected by the US Copyright Act for classroom education. Any use of those materials outside the class may violate the law.]

PLNU Recording Notification

In order to enhance the learning experience, please be advised that this course may be recorded by the professor for educational purposes, and access to these recordings will be limited to enrolled students and authorized personnel.

Note that all recordings are subject to copyright protection. Any unauthorized distribution or publication of these recordings without written approval from the University (refer to the Dean) is strictly prohibited.

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, images) that will end up in any work intended for publication that will be submitted to be graded for this course. 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.

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.

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.

Email and text are the best ways to reach me. Office hours are by appointment. Feel free to contact me for additional guidance or feedback on your assignments.