

## RESEARCH SKILLS IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

The Ohio State University

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Instructor: Ray Block, Jr.  
Office: B0316  
Office Hours: Fridays, 8:30-9:18 AM  
(and by appointment)  
E-Mail: block.49@osu.edu

Department of Political Science  
Course: Upward Bound Social Studies  
Location: B0136  
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### I. Course Description and Objectives

This is an independent study designed to give you a broad overview of the nature of inquiry in the social sciences. My goal is to teach you some of the tools of the trade for doing successful research: thinking, designing, analyzing, and writing. I hope that this course (1) will lead you to reflect thoughtfully on the assumptions you bring to your research interests and (2) will broaden your appreciation for the range of research tools available to you.

Social science research deals with three major topics: the philosophy of science, research design, and qualitative and/or quantitative analysis. We will talk about all three topics in this course. First, we will begin by explaining what social science research is, how social scientists do it, and why social science research is important. Second, we turn to questions about “epistemology” and the “scientific method” (don’t worry, by the end of class everyone will know what these terms mean). Third, we will spend a little time on the variety of research methods available to social scientists. Fourth, we end the course with a discussion of research ethics.

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### II. Required Texts

I will hand out required readings in class. These readings will come from numerous sources, including textbooks, research papers, book chapters, journal articles, and newspapers. I keep the reading load light, because I want you to focus more on doing a research project than on memorizing research concepts. Research is like dancing: you learn it by doing it. Books are essential for teaching you the theory of researching, but book knowledge is nothing without hands-on experience. The good news is that you have less reading in this class than in other classes. The bad news is that, because I lightened the reading load, I expect all the readings on the syllabus to be completed before each class. No exceptions. No excuses. No whining.

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### III. Course Requirements

Course requirements are subject to change, but you can think of the syllabus as a teacher-student contract. This contract loosely describes what students should expect from teachers and what teachers should expect from students. Here is what you can expect from your teacher. You can expect me to be dedicated to helping provide you with the necessary skills to do well in this course. Also, I am committed to making this course a worthwhile experience for each of you. Generally, I require that students have an open mind and be willing to learn. Specifically, I require two things from you: lots of participation and a term paper. I describe each below.

- **Active class participation and attendance: 40%**

Students are required to read assigned readings and come to each class prepared to discuss them. Class participation will involve two components: one, contributing thoughtful ideas, arguments, etc. in class on a regular basis; and two, listening politely to the contributions of classmates. I have 4 simple rules about

class participation.

1. There are no stupid comments, questions, or ideas.  
(Corollary to rule #1: There are inappropriate ones).
2. It is okay to disagree with others (especially the teacher).
3. Respect each other.
4. Have fun.

It is tough to participate when you are not in class, so failing to attend class will cost you points in two areas (in attendance and in participation opportunities). I will take attendance each class period. Students are permitted three (5) excused absences during the institute. Although excused absences do include illness (must be accompanied by a doctor's note), I will not excuse routine appointments because such appointments should be scheduled outside of class time.

- **A Written Assignment: 60%**

Students will have to write a research design for exploring a topic in the social sciences. These research designs should do two things. First, they should sketch out the ideas and goals of your topic. Second, and more importantly, they should "sell me" on your idea. In addition to mapping out your course of action, research designs should briefly explain how your term paper fits into the "big picture." In other words, students will explain why their topic is important to the study of social science.

Designs should be well-written, well-organized, and the instructor must agree in advance to your topic. They should be typed, double-spaced, using no larger than a 12-point font and no smaller than a 10 point font, and they should be about 5 to 7 pages long (including the title page and bibliography). I expect students to follow an accepted social science footnote and bibliographic style (please do not use MLA format). I will give more detailed about the paper expectations later.

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#### IV. Grades and Evaluations

I do not like giving letter grades. However, since I have to evaluate students, then each of you starts out with the highest possible grade in this course. I grade on a demerit rather than a merit system because I think it levels the playing field. Also, I think it makes learning less about "proving oneself" and more about "maintaining focus." Each student comes into class with 100 points, and I evaluate students based on how many points they end up with at the end of the quarter. The grading logic is simple. The goals for this course are on the front page of the syllabus, and I measure how successful students are at fulfilling those goals based on how well they meet the course requirements.

- If you end up with 90 or more points, then you are a superstar. You should be teaching the class, not the instructor.
- If you end up with between 80 and 89 points, you achieved all the major goals of the class, but you did not fulfill some minor requirements.
- If you earn between 70 and 79 points, then you met all the major goals, but you did not complete many of the minor requirements.
- Students with 60 to 69 points at the end of the quarter fulfilled only a few major goals.
- Students with 59 points or less did not achieve any of the major goals of the class.

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#### V. Overview of Topics

Each section should take approximately one week. If we are having a good time, we may stay longer. Please note that I reserve the right to change the syllabus as I feel necessary.

##### Section 1: The Philosophy of Science

In this section, we take care of the housekeeping. We will begin with an icebreaking exercise to get to know one another. Then, we will spend a few minutes going over the syllabus. Finally, we will get into

some of the major theoretical questions behind doing research. I list the topics we will discuss below:

- What is science?
- What is social science?
- The scientific method: What hard and soft sciences have in common.
- Theories, models, hypotheses, and variables
- Concepts and measurement
- Biases in research

Required readings:

Babbie, Earl. 1973. "The Logic of Science." Chapter 1 from Survey Research Methods. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing (pp. 1-22).

Babbie, Earl. 1973. "Science and Social Science." Chapter 2 from Survey Research Methods. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing (pp. 23-30).

### **Section 2: Research Design**

Now that we have discussed the issues that go into social science inquiry, we will now discuss the ways that social scientists conduct research. There are numerous social science research approaches, each with its strengths and weaknesses. This section will briefly expose students to the following approaches.

- Case studies
- Analyzing existing data
- Experiments
- Participant observation
- Content analysis
- Computer simulations

Required Readings:

Babbie, Earl. 1973. "Science and Social Science." Chapter 2 from Survey Research Methods. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing (pp. 31-39).

### **Section 3: Qualitative vs. Quantitative Research**

The designs discussed in section 2 fall into two categories: qualitative or quantitative research. There is an ongoing debate over which is the better style of research. People criticize quantitative researchers for being too empirical (focusing too much on the "numbers" and thus losing sight of the important questions). Likewise, people criticize qualitative researchers for being too subjective (overly biased or non-systematic in their approach to research problems). Some researchers get around this debate by including both qualitative and quantitative methods in their analyses. I invite students to enter this debate, and we will touch upon the following topics:

- Who's right? Do you agree more with the qualitative people or with the quantitative people?
- Can you ever really strike the mean between being too empirical and being too subjective?
- Are there instances when one approach is more appropriate than another?

Required Readings:

"The Qualitative versus Quantitative Debate." The Writing Center @CSU: Writing Guide. (13 June 2002)  
<<http://writing.colostate.edu/references/research/gentrans/pop2f.cfm>>

King, Gary, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba. 1994. "The Science in Social Science" Chapter 1 from Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inquiry in Qualitative Research. Princeton, NJ. Princeton University Press (pp. 3-7).

### **Section 4: Research Ethics**

Research ethics deals with two very important questions: What constitutes good, professional, and ethical

research? What steps can researchers take to ensure that their studies are ethical? These questions continue to vex scientists because there are times when ethical demands and scientific interests come into conflict. Among the many issues raised in this section, we will discuss the following:

- Using human subjects
- Costs and benefits of social science research
- Informed consent
- Privacy
- Anonymity and confidentiality
- Professional code of ethics

Required Readings:

Nachmias, Chava-Frankfort and David Nachmias “Ethics in Social Science Research.” Chapter 4 from Research Methods in the Social Sciences, 5th Edition. New York: St. Martin’s Press (pp. 76-95).

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### VI. Assignment Schedule

Since the only major assignment is the research design, we will use class time to help students write the paper. I break the final paper into four (4) weekly assignments. Each assignment is worth fifteen (15) points, and each assignment relates to a different part of their final paper.

- **July 3:** A proposed paper topic (1 to 2 paragraphs long) is due at the end of class.
- **July 12:** A Rough draft of bibliography (minimum of 5 sources) due at the end of class.
- **July 19:** Rough draft of research methodologies (1 page long) due at the end of class
- **August 1:** The final paper due for class presentations.

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### VI. The Fine Print

Some of this may not apply to Upward Bound students, but I have to tell you anyway.

**Course Policies:** Late assignments will be penalized ten (10) points for each day they are late. Assignments that are more than a week late will not be accepted.

**Academic Honesty:** All of the work you do in this course is expected to be your own. Absolutely no cheating or plagiarism (using someone else’s words or ideas without proper documentation) will be tolerated. Upward Bound will be notified if there is the possibility for expulsion for any cases of cheating.

**Disability:** Students with disabilities that have been certified by the Office for Disabilities will be appropriately accommodated, and should inform the instructor of their needs during the first week of the program. Students may also contact the Upward Bound coordinator, Kia Woodward (292-2233) for more information about specific services.

**Office Hours:** Office hours are a time for you to come visit the instructor outside of class to discuss readings, lectures, discussions, presentations, papers, exams, assignments, or anything else remotely related to one’s life as a student at this university. I strongly encourage students to meet with me throughout the summer. Coming to office hours is a great way to boost your overall class participation grade. Although office visits do not replace in-class participation, students can interact with the instructor in a more relaxed environment if they are not always comfortable with speaking out in class. Most importantly, office hours help me to remember students’ names. If the office hours established on the syllabus are not feasible for you, please call or e-mail me to arrange an appointment.

### **Top 10 List Of Ways To Irritate Your Instructor**

(Adapted from Dr. William Nish, Georgia College)

- Do not read your assignments before class lecture and discussion
- Label as “busy work,” “irrelevant,” and “boring,” anything that you do not like to do or that you do not understand.
- Read a newspaper, make cell phone calls, or talk to classmates if you are not interested in the lecture topic.
- Avoid using the instructor’s office hours for appointments.
- Be consistently late to class and other appointments.
- Be very casual about class attendance.
- Avoid taking exams at the same time and under the same conditions as the rest of the class.
- Always be ready with reasons why you are an exception to the rules established for the class.
- Expect your professor to be waiting at home to take your calls.
- Do not participate in such mundane activities as departmental advising appointments.

### **Top 6 List of Ways to Impress Your Instructor**

(Adapted from Khalilah L. Brown, The Ohio State University)

- Come to class regularly and on time.
- Read thoroughly and before the class period in which the readings will be discussed.
- Contribute regularly to class discussion.
- Pay attention and ask questions when you do not understand.
- Complete your assignments in a timely manner.
- Take the initiative to contact your professor if you are having any difficulties.