

SE301 Making the Case: Human Rights Research and Reporting

Seminar Leader: Fred Abrahams
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Times: Tue & Thu, 9-10:30am
Office Hours: by appointment

Course Description

This workshop-oriented class teaches the practical skills of a human rights investigator: how to identify the topic and focus of an investigation, how to design an investigative strategy, how to conduct the fact-finding, and how to present findings. Covered topics include research design, interviewing victims and witnesses, interviewing officials, corroborating evidence, using new technologies, consulting experts and using secondary sources, mitigating security risks, and managing personal stress, wellbeing and resilience. Students will develop their writing and presentation skills to communicate human rights findings in clear, concise and compelling ways. Guest speakers from the human rights movement will occasionally join to present their experiences and advice.

Requirements

- Attend every class having read or watched the assigned material carefully.
- Participate actively in discussions.
- Submit assignments on time.
- A spirit of critical inquiry.

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation. If additional absences are sought, please speak with the instructor in advance.

Bard College Berlin does not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR SPRING 2022: Some students may need to begin the semester remotely due to travel restrictions caused by the pandemic. In addition, all students and instructors must refrain from in-person attendance if they are feeling ill.

Assignments

Thoughtfully complete all written assignments as presented in the syllabus in a timely manner, plus the report review presentation.

Policy on Late Submission of Assignments

Assignments that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept assignments that are more than 24 hours late. Where an instructor agrees to accept a late submission, it must be handed in within four weeks of the deadline. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

1. Class Participation 30% (15% for weeks 1-7 and 15% for weeks 8-14)

Students are expected to engage actively in class discussions and exercises by coming prepared, asking questions, offering comments, and contributing to a collaborative learning environment. Students should post a short comment on the readings, or respond to a classmate's comment, on the Google classroom site at least three times in the semester.

2. Report Review (10%): Students will assess one published human rights report, including: what the report covered, what methodologies it used, how it was organized, how it was presented, if it had gaps, and what impact it had. In addition to a written assessment (5%), students will present their findings to class (5%).

3. Written Assignments (60%)

Various written assignments as explained in the syllabus.

Schedule

++ The class plan might change slightly due to schedules. Advance notice will be given. ++

Week One

Tuesday, February 1

Information session: Course introduction and syllabus review (remote)

Thursday, February 3

No class (made up in completion week)

Week Two

Tuesday, February 8

Intro to Human Rights Research

- What is human rights research?

- Who does it?
- How to do it?
- What are the aims?
- What are the risks?

Readings: 2 short to mid-length human rights reports; Forum-Asia, [Handbook on Fact-Finding and Documentation of Human Rights Violations](#), chapter 1; HURIDOCS, [What is Documentation](#), chapters 1-4.

Thursday, February 10

Human Rights Violations

- What is a violation?
- Who is a violator?

Readings: [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), 2 human rights reports
Assignment due: 1-page description of one human rights report

Week Three

Tuesday, February 15

Human Rights Investigations

- What to investigate?
- Investigative approach
- Project design

Readings: 2 human rights reports; [Handbook on Fact-Finding and Documentation of Human Rights Violations](#), chapter 2; Dermot Groome, *Handbook of Human Rights Investigation*, chapter 2; HURIDOCS, [What is Documentation](#), chapters 5-9.

Assignment due: 1-page description of one of the report's methodologies

Thursday, February 17

Visit to Human Rights Watch Berlin office (or remote)

- Discussion with researchers

Readings: TBD

Assignment due: prepare 3 questions for each of the researchers based on their work

Week Four

Tuesday, February 22

Human Rights Interviews I

- Whom to interview
- How to interview
 - Setting
 - Informed Consent

Readings: UN OHCHR, [Manual on Human Rights Monitoring – chapter 11 on interviews](#).

Assignment due: 2 pages on what you learned from the HRW researchers

Thursday, February 24

Human Rights Interviews II

- Fact-finding
- Corroboration

Readings: Diane Orentlicher, *Bearing Witness: The Art and Science of Human Rights Fact-Finding*;
interview questionnaire
Assignment due: Whom to interview exercise

Week Five

Tuesday, March 1

Human Rights Interviews III

- Mock interview (victim or witness)

Readings: Interview scenario

Assignment due: Interview questionnaire

Thursday, March 3

Human Rights Interviews IV

- Special groups: children, older people, people with disabilities, survivors of sexual violence
- Interviewing survivors of trauma

Readings: [WHO Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Researching, Documenting and Monitoring Sexual Violence in Emergencies](#) and [Draft Murad Code on the Conduct of Documenting Conflict-Related Sexual Violence](#).

Week Six

Tuesday, March 8

Holiday - Women's Day

Thursday, March 10

Human Rights Interviews V

- Interviewing Officials
- Mock interview

Readings: Dermot Groome, *Handbook of Human Rights Investigation*, chapter 8.

Week Seven

Tuesday, March 15

Human Rights Interviews VI

- Working with interpreters
- Recording and taking notes
- Remote interviews

Readings: [IICI Guidelines on Remote Interviews](#)

Thursday, March 17

Documenting Violations against Women

- Discrimination
- Domestic violence
- Sexual violence

Gender-sensitive Research

Readings: Agnès Callamard, [A Methodology for Gender-Sensitive Research](#); OHCHR, [Integrating a Gender Perspective into Human Rights Investigations](#); WHO, [Researching Violence Against Women](#).

Assignment due: Report Review due

Week Eight

Tuesday, March 22

Security – physical and digital

Readings: TBD

Thursday, March 24

Using Experts

- Doctors
- Forensic Pathologists
- Lawyers
- Scientists
- Other professionals

Readings: TBD

Week Nine

Tuesday, March 29

Investigating Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Violations

Readings: 2 human rights reports; The Transformation of Human Rights Fact-Finding, chapter 18

Thursday, March 31

Non-qualitative Methods I

- Digital open source research

Readings: Digital Witness, chapters 1-2; [Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open Source Investigations](#)

Week Ten

Tuesday, April 5

Non-qualitative Methods II

- Data analysis
- Remote sensing
- Surveys
- Crowd sourcing

Readings: Digital Witness, chapters 10 and 14; Transformation of Human Rights Fact-Finding, chapter 17 (Brian Root, Numbers are Only Human)

Thursday, April 7

Visual Investigations

Readings/Viewings: TBD

SPRING BREAK

Week Eleven

Tuesday, April 19

Writing for Human Rights I

- Types of reports
- Credible, clear and compelling reports
- Using testimony
- Sourcing

- Methodology sections
- Crafting recommendations

Readings: 2 human rights reports

Thursday, April 21

Writing for Human Rights II

- The press release
- Private and public letters

Readings: TBD

Assignment due: A methodology section

Week Twelve

Tuesday, April 26

Visit to the European Center for Constitutional & Human Rights

Readings: TBD

Assignment due: A public or private letter

Thursday, April 28

Report presentations

Week Thirteen

Tuesday, May 3

Visit to German Foreign Ministry, human rights department

Readings: [German positions on human rights](#); [German Commissioner for Human Rights](#);

Thursday, May 5

Stress and Resilience

- The hazards of human rights work
- Vicarious trauma
- Self-care

Readings: Meg Satterthwaite, [Evidence of Trauma: the Impact of Human Rights Work on Advocates](#); First Draft News, [Journalism and Vicarious Trauma](#)

Week Fourteen

Tuesday, May 10

The Ethics of Human Rights Reporting

Readings: Digital Witness, chapter 11; Transformation of Human Rights Fact-Finding, chapters 4 and 7.

Assignment due: Self-care plan

Thursday, May 12

Human Rights Career Panel

Week Fifteen – Completion Week