

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 subject of an investigation, design an investigative strategy, gather information, corroborate facts, and present findings. Topics include research design, interviewing victims and witnesses, interviewing officials, verifying information, using new technologies, consulting experts and using secondary sources, mitigating security risks, and promoting mental health. 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 share their experiences and work.

Requirements

- Attend class having read or watched the assigned material.
- Participate 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.

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, in Google classroom 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. Please note no class in the first week, to be made up in completion week. ++

Week One

Tuesday, September 5

No class (made up in completion week)

Thursday, September 7

No class (made up in completion week)

Week Two

Tuesday, September 12

Course introduction and syllabus review

Readings: [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)

Thursday, September 14

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: Two 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](#), chaps 1-4.

Week Three

Tuesday, September 19

Human Rights Violations

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

Readings: 2 human rights reports

Thursday, September 21

Human Rights Investigations

- What to investigate
- How to investigate
- 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 human rights report

Week Four

Tuesday, September 26

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: 1-page summary of a human rights report's methodology

Thursday, September 28

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, October 3 – Federal Holiday

Thursday, October 5

Human Rights Interviews III

- Mock interview (victim or witness)

Readings: Interview scenario

Assignment due: Interview questionnaire

Week Six

Tuesday, October 10

Human Rights Interviews IV

- Special groups: children, older people, people with disabilities
- 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](#).

Thursday, October 12

Human Rights Interviews V

- Interviewing Officials
- Mock interview

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

Week Seven

Tuesday, October 17

Human Rights Interviews VI

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

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

Thursday, October 19

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 – Fall Break

Week Nine

Tuesday, October 31

Security – physical and digital

Readings: TBD

Thursday, November 2

Using Experts

- Doctors

- Forensic Pathologists
- Lawyers
- Scientists
- Other professionals

Readings: TBD

Week Ten

Tuesday, November 7

Investigating Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Violations

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

Thursday, November 9

Non-qualitative Methods I

- Digital open source research

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

Week Eleven

Tuesday, November 14

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, November 16

Visual Investigations

Readings/Viewings: TBD

Week Twelve

Tuesday, November 21

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, November 23

Writing for Human Rights II

- The press release
- Private and public letters

Readings: TBD

Assignment due: A methodology section

Week Thirteen

Tuesday, November 28

Visit to the European Center for Constitutional & Human Rights

Readings: TBD

Assignment due: A public or private letter

Thursday, November 30

Report presentations

Week Fourteen

Tuesday, December 5

Visit to German Foreign Ministry, human rights department

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

Thursday, December 7

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 Fifteen

Tuesday, December 12

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, December 14

Visit to Human Rights Watch Berlin office

- Discussion with researchers

Readings: TBD

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

Week Sixteen – Completion Week

Tuesday, December 19

Report presentations

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

Thursday, December 21

Report presentations