

**Department of Communication
Assessment of COMMMA Report
2024-2025**

Students who complete an M.A. in Communication at the University of Arkansas learn how they can use communication theory and research to investigate a civic engagement related area of concern facing communities, organizations, states, nations and/or world.

Learning Goals & Objectives: Upon graduation, students with an M.A. in Communication will:

- Goal #1. Understand the historical, theoretical and methodological foundations of and differences in the discipline of communication and identify an area of interest to them;
- Goal #2. Understand the major research methodologies (i.e., qualitative, quantitative, rhetorical) used in our field and demonstrate some proficiency in using them;
- Goal #3. Apply research-based, theory-informed knowledge to identify and address real-life civic engagement communication issues in the form of a capstone project, apply theory-informed and research-based knowledge to extend research on a communication issue in the form of a thesis, or complete a theory-informed comprehensive exam that shows competence in research application.

Learning Processes (LP): To achieve these learning goals and objectives:

- LP #1. Graduate students complete the Introduction to Communication Paradigms course. This class has been offered an introductory course to the MA program since 2015. Graduate students are exposed to a variety of paradigmatic and expertise areas through faculty visits and guest lectures in this course. All graduate students after August 2015 have taken this class.
- LP #2. Graduate students complete two required methods courses. Students are able to select from the following choices: Qualitative Methods, Quantitative Methods, and Rhetorical Methods. Redesigned classes were first offered in Spring 2017 and underwent additional modifications each semester thereafter, especially as the courses were taught by other instructors in a three-year cycle.
- LP #3. Graduate students complete a master's thesis, capstone project, or comprehensive exams. The first two options require that students identify a research question pertaining to an issue, articulate a theory that can illuminate the research question, utilize a research method appropriate for the theory and research question, gather data appropriate for answering that question, write up the results of the experience, create a tangible product (i.e., thesis, capstone project), and publicly present their results. The third option requires students to show competence in a specific theory and methodology, and to apply that knowledge to a specific context. The Department of Communication has offered the thesis option since

the program began. The Capstone in Communication course was pilot tested in Spring 2018. Faculty and current graduate students provided input into the course design in 2017, and procedures have continued to be clarified for students. The third exit option, the comprehensive exam, was briefly discontinued around 2018 but redesigned by the graduate faculty during the 2021-2022 academic year and made available to students again in Fall 2022.

Assessment Methods (AM): To ensure students are achieving these goals and objectives:

- AM #1. Graduate students successfully complete assignments in Introduction to Communication Paradigms course, which exposes them to the major areas of the field and helps them develop their own interest areas. Final grades in Fall 2024 indicated students sufficiently mastered the course content, following trends dating back to 2015.

- AM #2. Graduate students successfully complete assignments in two research methods classes, which helps them demonstrate their knowledge of various research methodologies. Final grades indicate that students sufficiently master the course content. Students also practice and apply knowledge from research methods courses during their exit experience (typically in their second/final year in the program). Final grades in Spring 2025 indicated students sufficiently mastered the course content.

- AM #3. Guided by their advisors and committees, graduate students successfully complete one of our three exit experiences: the thesis, capstone project, or comprehensive exams. Each exit option is represented by students every year. These numbers have been fairly consistent year to year:
 - In Fall 2018 and Spring 2019 eight students defended their capstone projects (4 per term) and four defended their thesis.
 - In Fall 2019 and Spring 2020 six students defended their capstone projects (3 per term) and three defended their thesis.
 - In Fall 2021 and Spring 2022, nine students defended their capstone projects and two defended their thesis.
 - Between Summer 2022 and Summer 2023 (a slightly extended period of assessment), six students defended their thesis, six defended capstones, and two defended the comprehensive exam.
 - Between Fall 2023 and Spring 2024, two students defended their thesis, two defended capstones, and six defended the comprehensive exam.
 - Between Fall 2024 and Spring 2025, three students defended their thesis and five defended their comprehensive exam (three theses, one capstone, and one exam expected in Summer 2025).

Assessment Processes: When and Who

1. Goal #1 and Goal #2 are assessed at the end of the Fall and Spring semesters by the course instructors (Direct Assessments). Results are shared with the Graduate Director.
2. Student completion or scheduling of the courses important to achieving Goals #1 (Introduction to Communication Paradigms) and #2 (two research methods classes) are assessed by the Graduate Director each spring as part of the department's annual graduate student academic review process which is reported to the Graduate School.
3. All goals are regularly assessed by the Graduate Director and Graduate Committee, who meet monthly to discuss strategic short-term and long-term planning for the M.A. program. Feedback is collected from graduate students, graduate faculty, and staff. The Graduate Director and Graduate Committee update the MA program's Blackboard course with important forms, guidelines, and resources, which are accessible for all graduate students.
4. All goals are regularly assessed by the Graduate Director in partnership with the Graduate Liaison Committee—a committee of three graduate student representatives elected by their peers. Graduate Liaisons collect feedback from their peers regarding their experiences, successes, and challenges (Indirect Assessment). Student recommendations for changes are sought and implemented, where possible.
5. Goal #3 is assessed at the end of a graduate student's final semester through their completion of one of the three exit experience options (thesis, capstone, or comprehensive exams). Thesis students must successfully present and defend their thesis to the satisfaction of their advisor and committee (a total of three faculty). Capstone students must successfully present their work product to the satisfaction of their advisor and committee (a total of four faculty), who evaluate their work with a Capstone Panelist Evaluation Form. Comprehensive exam students must pass their exam, which consists of three essay questions evaluating their understanding of theory, method, and an area of specialization. Comprehensive exams are evaluated by the advisor and a committee (a total of three faculty).

Status, Outcomes, and Results

The Graduate Director shares the results of the assessment processes with members of the Graduate Committee and the department's Administrative Committee to identify whether or not any changes are needed. As needed, recommendations for improvement (e.g., changes in exit experience procedures) are brought to the attention of the full faculty during scheduled meetings.

Course Reports

The information below is from the 2024-2025 instructor reports for COMM 51603 (Paradigms), COMM 51703 (Qualitative Methods), COMM 51203 (Quantitative Methods), and COMM 51803 (Rhetorical Methods).

COMM 51603 (Introduction to Communication Paradigms) was taught and assessed by a new instructor for the 2024-2025 academic year. Building on materials from the previous instructor, the instructor made some modifications to the course. The specific learning objectives and methods of assessment are listed below.

COMM 51603 Learning Objectives

1. Arrive at some understanding of the history and boundaries of the communication field.
2. Explore the nature of contemporary communication research, including its primary questions, paradigms, modes of inquiry, standards, and limitations.
3. Sketch the professional landscape, including its organizational structures.
4. Design communication research.

The first learning objective, focusing on understanding of the history and boundaries of the communication field, was assessed through two sets of reading responses. The second learning objective, based on exploring the basic qualities of contemporary communication research, was assessed through a position paper and four sets of reading responses. The third learning objective, focused on learning the professional landscape of the field of communication, was assessed through a reading response assignment and a position paper. The fourth learning objective, focused on designing communication research, was assessed through two position papers.

The final grade distribution included 4 As, 9 Bs, and 3 Cs. Given that this course is an introduction to graduate school, writing and citation mechanics, and an overview of the field of communication, it is meant to be both challenging and rewarding. In anonymous evaluations (93.75% completion rate; 15 out of 16 students completed the survey), students rated the course 4.60 and rated the instructor 4.93 on a 5.00 scale (where 1 = very poor and 5 = excellent), indicating a positive experience.

A general overview of the position papers is provided below.

1. Position Paper #1: In Position Paper #1, students will identify the paradigm that best informs their research trajectory/interests. In five pages, students will explain how their approach to research aligns with their chosen paradigm's ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions.
2. Position Paper #2: In Position Paper #2, students will work in groups to practice the research writing process (brainstorming, question generating, researching, and writing) before you are asked to do this as individuals at the end of the semester.
3. Position Paper #3: In Position Paper #3, students will draft a research plan for the next three semesters. In eight to 10 pages, the plan will include tentatively selecting the thesis, capstone, or comprehensive exam route, proposing a project idea, identifying and providing a rationale for three possible advisors, and identifying other possible research goals (e.g., independent studies, conference submissions, publications, mentorships with faculty).

Students also completed weekly reading responses to demonstrate their understanding of assigned readings and course vocabulary. Reading responses were due prior to class time, ensuring that students take accountability and come to class prepared to engage in discussion.

The instructor recommends creating more practice and/or low-stake assignments where students can exercise skills as they develop, particularly in regard to APA mechanics. The instructor plans to execute this adjustment next Fall.

COMM 51703 (Qualitative Methods) has been taught and assessed by the same instructor in the last three academic years (since Spring 2023). The instructor redesigned the course in Spring 2023, with specific course goals (see below) and methods of assessment.

COMM 51703 Course Goals

1. Understand the differences between post-positivist and interpretive epistemologies.
2. Utilize strategies for improving the quality of qualitative research.
3. Demonstrate competence in interview, focus group, and ethnography collection methods.
4. Implement a variety of analytic methods to interpret qualitative data.
5. Design a proposal for a qualitative research project.

Goal 1 is largely assessed by in-class engagement/participation and a formal exam. Paradigmatic approaches to qualitative research are introduced in Week 2 of the class and continue to be a recurring topic throughout the semester. Students also had the opportunity to reflect on their paradigmatic preferences, among other topics, in the Self-Reflexivity Assignment. Knowledge and application of post-positivist and interpretive epistemologies are also assessed through the semester-long Qualitative Research Proposal assignment, particularly in early phases (Proposed Research Questions, Rationale, and Proposed Method).

Goal 2 addresses an important topic in this course, given that strategies for improving qualitative quality are key to demonstrating credibility and rigor in qualitative research. Strategies are introduced early in the course (Weeks 2 and 3). Goal 2 is assessed at multiple points in the Qualitative Research Proposal, particularly in later phases (Outline, Rough Draft, and Final Paper). In the final paper, a required section covers Qualitative Quality, where students must critically assess and describe how their proposed research demonstrates rigor. Students must demonstrate an understanding of the eight strategies of qualitative quality (also known as the Big Tent criteria).

Goal 3 is assessed through in-class participation for active learning activities in the classroom, the exam, the fieldnotes assignment, and multiple phases in the Qualitative Research Proposal. Regarding interviewing and focus groups, students complete required readings and participate in class activities such as crafting interview questions, role-playing common interview challenges, and participating in and deconstructing an arts-based focus-group. Regarding ethnography, students also complete required readings and participate in class activities where they practice making observations in real time. Students also complete a graded fieldnotes assignment, where they complete at least 1 hour of ethnographic observation, take raw

records, and transform notes into formal fieldnotes following best practices in qualitative research. The exam contains essay-based questions assessing understanding of interviewing and ethnography concepts. For the Qualitative Research Proposal, starting in Phase 3 until the final paper, students must create either an interview protocol or describe another method in detail (e.g., ethnography).

Goal 4 is assessed by in-class participation, the exam, and multiple phases in the Qualitative Research Proposal. Analytic methods are the focus of the second half of the course, including: grounded theory, constant comparative analysis, thematic analysis, discourse analysis, narrative analysis, and the phronetic iterative approach. In addition to completing required readings, students received hands-on opportunities in the classroom to practice these analytic techniques. These activities are graded for in-class engagement-participation to create safe opportunities for students to practice these techniques, make mistakes, and correct and improve their techniques. Later, Goal 4 is assessed more formally through both the exam and final paper. Multiple questions on the exam address these analytic methods in essay-based questions. For the final paper, students must describe an analytic method that appropriately matches their research question(s) in abundant detail.

Goal 5 is directly assessed through the Qualitative Research Proposal. This assignment, which contains six phases, is intentionally designed to be completed in pieces throughout the semester. As students build their qualitative toolbox over the course of this semester, they are required to make meaningful progress towards the final paper. These phases allow students to think strategically about what they are building, and they also provide the opportunity for feedback and dialogue with the professor. Phases of the Qualitative Research Proposal include:

- Proposed Research Questions: Propose research questions that will ultimately drive the project's design and direction.
- Rationale: The rationale is essentially the opening of the final paper. For the rationale, students justify the focus of their study with clear arguments.
- Proposed Method: The proposed method will focus on data collection method. Students do one of the following: create a protocol for an interview or focus group, create a mixed-method survey, or detail another data capture method.
- Outline: This outline is the first step to a rough draft where students highlight the most important points and citations they plan to make in each section of the final paper.
- Rough Draft: The rough draft is a more complete but ongoing representation of progress towards the final paper.
- Final Paper: The final paper is a brief research proposal. This document is about 15 pages in length (double spaced) and includes an abstract, rationale embedded within a brief literature review, research question(s), and a comprehensively argued qualitative method (in terms of both data collection and analysis) for answering the research question(s).

In addition to the information above, students also complete an assignment called Discussion Leader at some point during the semester, providing an additional data point for assessment. Once per semester, students serve as the “discussion leader” of the week, where they are responsible for:

- Thoroughly immersing themselves in the week's readings,
- Preparing a 10-minute synthesis of points they thought were most compelling and present these in a dynamic way,
- Providing students with a handout summarizing these points, and
- Facilitating class discussion and/or one class activity for ~30-40 minutes to help students understand one or more of the main points of the readings.

The final grade distribution included 14 As and 1 B. At the end of the semester, students provided feedback that they particularly enjoyed (1) hands-on activities/workshops, (2) the discussion leader assignment, and (3) the accessible textbook written by Sarah Tracy.

The instructor listed a couple areas where the course can be improved. First, echoing feedback from previous years' assessments, they suggest students would greatly benefit from the opportunity to practice qualitative coding on NVivo and/or MAXQDA software, given the rise of computer-assisted qualitative analysis. Partnering with the CCR to install software on lab computers and/or seeking a Teaching grant would be a great option for the future. Second, the instructor suggested moving either Qualitative Methods or Rhetorical Methods to Fall semesters. Historically, all methods courses have been taught in the spring semester. The instructor, in consultation with the Graduate Committee, sees potential in pairing one methods course with Introduction to Communication Paradigms—exposing graduate students to foundational writing and research skills in their first semester.

COMM 51203 (Quantitative Methods) has been taught and assessed by the same instructor in the last three academic years (since Spring 2023). The instructor redesigned the course in Spring 2023, with specific learning objectives (see below) and methods of assessment. This report offers an assessment of student achievement in COMM 51203 for the Spring 2025 semester only. The discussion below is organized around the learning objectives as expressed on the course syllabus. Final grades were composed of three parts: 1) homework and quizzes (25%); research project (25%); and SPSS data analysis (50%).

COMM 51203 Learning Objectives:

1. Identifying research problems and asking research questions & applying theory and existing literature in developing and justifying hypotheses;
 2. Conceptualizing and designing strategies to test these hypotheses & creating instruments and executing data collection;
 3. Knowing which statistical test to utilize and analyzing data & interpreting results and identifying implications;
 4. Organization and writing skills to best articulate the importance of the research.
1. Identifying research problems and asking research questions & applying theory and existing literature in developing and justifying hypotheses
- This objective targets students' ability to conceptualize a research question appropriate for quantitative, social scientific research in communication using existing literature and observations of communication phenomena.

- This skill was assessed and heavily discussed each week for the first half of the semester. Responding to student feedback asking for more graded items, there were weekly quizzes and regular homework assignments. For example, in week 2, students brought in quantitative research articles. We used these articles to 1) talk about the value and uses of quantitative research (the need for this research), how to identify research questions from observed social issues, and articulating in the introduction the need for a study to the audience (Week 2 & 3) and 2) developing and justifying hypotheses using existing literature (Week 4 & 5). This approach had improved results compared to last year.
- Throughout the process of learning how others did these things, students formed research teams.

2. Conceptualizing and designing strategies to test these hypotheses

- This objective was focused on students' ability to understand the different types of experiments and surveys. This ability was developed through the middle weeks of the course. We continued to review the articles which they had supplied, analyzing the method section. In discussions of research questions and hypotheses posed by students, each student would then be asked to develop a study design to test the hypotheses.
- Rather than starting from scratch with research projects, I had collected data for four potential studies (each of the two groups selected one) and allowed students to lead the subsequent work on the projects and submit to NCA conference.

3. Knowing which statistical test to utilize and analyzing data & interpreting results and identifying implications

- This objective was focused on students' ability to know which statistical test to run and how to run in with SPSS. Though assigned to a different building, we met in Kimpel so students could have access to laptops equipped with SPSS. Two worksheets, with hypotheses and research questions, tested the students' ability to identify which test to run (with the help of a flow chart) based on the variable in the hypothesis or research question. Students did remarkably well. Eight of the CCR laptops were used to run SPSS.
- This skill was assessed through a practice final exam and then graded with the actual final exam. For each exam, students were given a dataset and a list of hypotheses. They had to construct variables, identify which test to run, and correctly report results. The final exam accounted for 50% of the grade. Students demonstrated sufficient mastery of this skill. The practice final, given two weeks before the actual final proved to be extremely useful in ascertaining where students still needed work. We covered those areas thoroughly the next week, and students improved significantly on the actual final.

4. Organization and writing skills

- This learning objective focused on the students' ability to write an article. Different sections of the paper were due throughout the semester, beginning with the literature review, then the introduction, then the method, followed by the results and discussion sections. It was assessed when each section was turned in and feedback was given. It

was graded when the final paper (25% of grade) was submitted. Lit reviews were at a high level; previous classes prepared them to take on this task, which allowed more time focused on other parts of the paper.

- It was highly valuable for students to have taken Paradigms before the method classes. However, I think the students benefit from taking both method classes in the same semester. Knowing they had two method classes, I tried to do most of the learning in class and office hours, not giving overly time-consuming homework assignments.

COMM 51803 (Rhetorical Methods) was taught and assessed by a new instructor for the 2024-2025 academic year, who redesigned the course after a previous faculty member's departure. The instructor redesigned the course in Spring 2025, with specific learning objectives (see below) and methods of assessment.

COMM 51803 Learning Objectives included:

1. Analyze critical writing and scholarly interpretive essays;
2. Locate salient material within critical and interpretive essays;
3. Apply techniques of interpretation to public communication;
4. Produce extended essay of critical interpretation; and
5. Demonstrate ability to present research in public forum;

Key Findings: What was learned from the data for Goal 2 (Demonstrating Knowledge of Methods)?

The Learning Goal and Objective #2 for the MA Program suggests that students will "Understand the major research methodologies used in our field and demonstrate some proficiency in using them." COMM 51803 is assessed based on students completing several assignments that are evaluated based on criteria matching specific learning objectives of the course. Below is a list of those specific learning objectives, and the average rankings, based on whether students were determined to be at the level of "Pre-Skill," "Emerging," "Basic," "Proficient," or "Exemplary."

- **Analyze critical writing and scholarly interpretive essays** – 85 percent of students in the course were considered "Exemplary," based on their completion of weekly discussion questions. 15 percent of the students were rated as "Proficient."
- **Locate salient material within critical and interpretive essays** - 85 percent of students in the course were considered "Exemplary," based on their completion of weekly discussion questions. 15 percent of the students were rated as "Proficient."
- **Apply techniques of interpretation to public communication** - 71 percent of students in the course were considered "Exemplary," based on their completion of a literature review completed for their final papers. 29 percent of students in the course were considered "Proficient."

- **Produce extended essay of critical interpretation** - 85 percent of students in the course were considered “Exemplary,” based on their completion of a final research paper that needed to be a conference quality manuscript. 15 percent of students in the course were considered “Proficient.”
- **Demonstrate ability to present research in public forum** – 85 percent of students in the course were considered “Exemplary,” based on their presentation of a final research paper that needed to be a conference quality manuscript. 15 percent of students in the course were considered “Proficient.”

There were a few important lessons based on the data collected from Spring 2025:

1. The majority of students were “exemplary” in their ability to analyze critical writing and scholarly interpretive essays, in addition to locating salient material within critical essays. The completion of discussion questions every week meant that they were completing all assigned readings, learning basic concepts about interpretive criticism, all while demonstrating a growing ability to critique essays based on their arguments, evidence, and application of theory.
2. Students this year were above average in their ability to apply techniques of interpretation to public communication, especially in designing a literature review or methods section that would frame such analysis. A total of 71 percent of students were considered to be exemplary, and 29 percent of students were proficient. Students tended to improve after receiving feedback on their literature reviews, and the final papers demonstrated growth in this area. Scaffolding the assignment was successful at producing growing opportunities and all students significantly revised this portion of their final essay.
3. The majority of students produced conference-quality essays using interpretive methods. Overall, 85 percent of students were considered exemplary, and 15 percent were proficient. Students demonstrated growth throughout the semester, and the small class size meant that the students were able to get to know one another, encourage each other, and build confidence. The key to their growth was mandatory drafts of each sections, rough drafts of final papers, and then a final draft that needed to address the instructor’s feedback from earlier drafts. Because the rough draft was due around the NCA deadline, 85 percent of students were able to submit their paper (which has been exceedingly rare in the past).

Actions Taken: Changes to course content, assignments, assessments, teaching methods, delivery format?

Based on the evaluation detailed above, I would note that changes implemented in recent years have been successful in improving the course:

1. The course name of “Rhetorical Methods” replaced “Interpretive Methods” this year, and has produced far less confusion among the students.
2. The paper was scaffolded and given an early deadline to help students submit to NCA, but it meant that they were more likely to miss remaining classes after that deadline. It may be important to reduce the number of possible absences to make the most of that remaining time.
3. It would be ideal for the instructor of this course to visit Paradigms to discuss the methods class to clarify what the course is about (which would be good for all methods instructors, actually). It may also be important to work with the instructor of Paradigms to make sure that Rhetorical Studies, Cultural Studies, and Film Studies are given adequate time to reflect the breadth of the humanities in the MA program. In previous semesters, these areas have been given at least two weeks, which allowed students to meet many faculty in areas related to this method. I’m not sure what was done this year, but it would be good to revisit how that intro course sets up the methods, and how methods faculty can provide students a preview.

Changes Recommended for Goal 2: Feedback to Director of Graduate Studies

No changes are recommended at this time.