



# COMM 5014: Communication Theory

## Instructor information

Instructor: Megan A. Duncan, Ph.D.

Office hours: 1 to 2 p.m. Tuesdays; 9:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. Wednesdays

Office location: 148 Shanks Hall

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## Course information

Term: Fall 2022

Time: 7 to 9:45 p.m. Tuesdays

Classroom: 043 Shanks

## Welcome to Comm Theory!

This course is designed to be an introduction to a wide range of communication theories, as well as a foundation to what a theory is and how it is useful to understand the world and expand knowledge. We're moving fast in this class, and we won't get too deep into any one theory. I'm focusing on getting you the basics of the discipline, allowing you to see the breadth of the field, and hoping to spark some interest that you can further explore in another class or your thesis project.

This course meets once a week for 2:45 hours. Here's how a typical class meeting will be structured:

- 7 to 7:30 p.m. faculty guest
- 5 minute break
- 7:35 to 8:25 p.m. instructor-led theory chapter review and discussion
- 5 minute break
- 8:30 to 9:15 p.m. student-led theory-in-context presentation and discussion
- 9:15 to 9:45 p.m. faculty-led project management discussion

To make the most of our time together, here's how to plan your typical week:

- One week before class - Canvas module unlocks course materials are available

- During week - Read Littlejohn chapter, Machi chapter, faculty guest work, and any PDFs listed under required readings. As you do this, take notes, re-read for comprehension, and seek out additional sources to help you understand. You will be unprepared for class discussion if you try to read all these things in the 24 hours before class. To fully understand these theories, you will need to re-read and pace your readings.
- During week - work on any “Milestone” assignments due.
- During week - prepare for your “Theory in Context presentation” if it’s your turn <- once per semester
- 5:30 p.m. Mondays - Reading reactions due in Canvas.
- 6:59 p.m. Tuesdays - Milestone assignments due in Canvas
- 7 p.m. Tuesdays - class starts promptly

I’m your instructor, Megan A. Duncan, Ph.D. (I use my middle initial deliberately because there’s another Dr. Megan Duncan on campus and I don’t want to cause confusion.) I remember being in your seats as a master’s student taking my first comm theory class and not entirely sure what it was all about. I also remember how dense and thick the chapters of the textbook were. So, because of that, I hope that I can also be a guide to how to navigate and succeed at grad school.

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### Course materials

These books are required:

- ["Theories of Human Communication"](#) Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel. 12th Edition
  - I've requested this book be put on course reserve at the library, but it is not available as of the first day of classes. I recommend you purchase this book. Used, rented, print or electronic are all fine.
- ["The Literature Review: Six Steps to Success."](#) Machi & McEvoy. Fourth Edition.
  - This book is available as an e-book from the VT Library.  
<https://virginiatech.on.worldcat.org/oclc/1288671357>
- Additional required reading materials will be distributed through Canvas.

These books are recommended:

- ["Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association."](#) Seventh Edition.

Other materials:

- You will need a computer that can access the Canvas, internet websites like the VT library, email, and Microsoft Office.

### Course information

#### Course Catalog Description:

A broad survey of contemporary theories and processes of interpersonal, public, and mediated human communication. Course is designed to foster an advanced understanding of development and evaluation of communication theories in terms of functions of theory, the relationship between theory, inquiry, and discovery, and the utility of theory for understanding human communication. The course will explore an historic range of communication theories, including interpretive, critical, rhetorical, and scientific.

#### Course Overview & Objectives:

This course is designed to provide students with the academic foundation necessary for graduate studies in the communication discipline. Students making the transition from undergraduate to graduate study, especially those from disciplines other than communication, need to develop an understanding of the breadth of communication theory and research. Having successfully completed this course, students will be able to:

- Define the term “theory” and articulate the goals of a theory
- Identify and discuss current and historical information about communication studies and communication theory
- Describe the scope and parameters of the field of communication studies
- Define the various areas of study within the field of communication studies
- Distinguish key ideas of theoretical traditions in the field of communication
- Articulate the assumptions and themes of selected communication theories covered in this course
- Apply a broad range of communication theories to personal, cultural, social and political issues or contexts
- Integrate communication theory across multiple contexts (e.g. communicator, message, conversation, group or organization, relationships, media, culture and society)
- Synthesize your academic interests in one of the academic traditions of the discipline
- Connect theory with the expertise of departmental faculty members

### **Course policies**

#### **Attendance**

I really, really want you to show up to the discussion. Even if you haven’t done the readings, or didn’t turn in a reaction paper. Show up. I will not embarrass you for not having completed the readings (but I will note it privately).

Attendance and participation is crucial to understanding the material in this discussion-based course. I expect you to be in the classroom for the entire class each week. Nevertheless, I understand that other situations can take priority over class. I allow you to miss one class meeting during the semester without penalty. “Missing” a class meeting also includes missing more than an hour of class (e.g. arriving late or leaving early). Starting with the second course meeting you miss, your attendance and grade will be penalized. Attendance and participation is 10 percent of your total course grade. This policy does not apply to the week you are scheduled to present with a classmate. Please see “Student Presentations” for more information about attendance that week.

#### **Participation**

Participation is just as important as attendance. Participation does not merely mean talking in class (but that is part of it). Participation is paying attention, demonstrating intellectual curiosity and engagement, and offering meaningful contributions to class discussions that increase your attendance and participation grade. Comments that demonstrate you did not do the readings, that you are not intellectually engaging, or that offer ad hominem attacks against classmates, class guests, or me will harm your participation grade. Paying attention to non-class distractions like your phone or non-class related websites will harm your participation grade. Attendance and participation is 10 percent of your total course grade.

#### **Late work and missed work**

If you find that you need an extension, please contact me to discuss your concerns. Extensions may be granted in the case of illness, family emergency, or other substantial need. Please contact me prior to the due date to request an extension. Submitting assignments late, without a granted extension from the instructor, may result in a reduced grade. Extensions will not be granted for reading reactions, instead I drop your lowest grade.

Late work will be accepted up to 24 hours after the due date with one full letter grade deduction. For example a B+ reaction paper becomes a C+ grade. After 24 hours, late work will not be accepted.

### **Graduate Honor Code and Academic integrity**

The tenets of the Virginia Tech Graduate Honor Code will be strictly enforced in this course, and all assignments shall be subject to the stipulations of the Graduate Honor Code. For more information on the Graduate Honor Code, please refer to the GHS Constitution located at

<https://graduateschool.vt.edu/academics/expectations/graduate-honor-system.html>

Students who are suspected of academic misconduct, including but not limited to plagiarism, cheating, falsification, academic sabotage, will be immediately addressed through the Graduate Honor system. Students may also directly report suspected academic misconduct online:

<https://graduateschool.vt.edu/academics/expectations/graduate-honor-system.html>

### **Accommodations**

Virginia Tech welcomes students with disabilities into the University's educational programs. The University promotes efforts to provide equal access and a culture of inclusion without altering the essential elements of coursework. If you anticipate or experience academic barriers that may be due to disability, including but not limited to ADHD, chronic or temporary medical conditions, deaf or hard of hearing, learning disability, mental health, or vision impairment, please contact the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office (540-231-3788, [ssd@vt.edu](mailto:ssd@vt.edu), or visit [ssd.vt.edu](http://ssd.vt.edu)). If you have an SSD accommodation letter, please meet with me privately during office hours as early in the semester as possible to deliver your letter and discuss your accommodations. You must give me reasonable notice to implement your accommodations, which is generally 5 business days and 10 business days for final exams.

Accommodation recommendations from the Dean's office for ANY documented learning need (the Dean's office supplies such paperwork) will be honored. Please notify me in person by the second week of class to discuss how I can ensure that you have a comfortable and reasonable learning environment.

Any student who has been confirmed by the University as having accommodations for learning must notify me in person by the second week of class so that we can work together to ensure your learning needs are met. For more information about accommodations, please go to the Services for Students with Disabilities office website: <http://www.ssd.vt.edu/>

### **Academic Support Services:**

Any student needing academic support should investigate the University's services at <http://www.studentsuccess.vt.edu/index.html>

For complete information on student services at Virginia Tech, please see: <http://www.dsa.vt.edu>.

### **Inclusion and support**

I will honor your request to address you by your chosen name and pronouns. Please advise me of this early in the semester.

I respect and honor your cultural and religious holidays. If you have a religious or cultural observance that will coincide with this class, please let me know in an email or office hour meeting by the start of the third week of classes.

### **Title IX and mandatory reporting**

I want you to feel able to share your life experiences in classroom discussions and written work. I want you to trust that I will keep any information you share private. Please be aware that I do have a mandatory reporting responsibility related to my role as a faculty member. This means I am required to share information regarding sexual misconduct or information about a crime that may have occurred on campus with the university Title IX Coordinator.

### **Wellness**

Supporting the mental health and well-being of students in my class is of high priority to me and Virginia Tech. If you are feeling overwhelmed academically, having trouble functioning, or are worried about a friend, please reach out to any of the following offices:

- Cook Counseling:
  - o 540-231-6557 to schedule an appointment and/or 24/7 crisis support
  - o [ucc.vt.edu](http://ucc.vt.edu) for more information
  
- Dean of Students Office:
  - o 540 231-3787 for general advice
  - o 540-231-6411 for after-hours crisis
  - o [dos.vt.edu](http://dos.vt.edu) for more information
  
- Hokie Wellness:

o [hokiewellness.vt.edu](http://hokiewellness.vt.edu) for more information about health and wellness workshops and consultations

· Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD)

o 540-231-3788 or [ssd.vt.edu](http://ssd.vt.edu) for more information about accommodations and other disability-related supports

For a full listing of campus resources check out [well-being.vt.edu](http://well-being.vt.edu).

### Syllabus changes

This syllabus is subject to change. I will announce changes in class and post information to Canvas if needed. I will also email the class as needed to alert students to any changes.

### Grading

#### Grading calculation

Category	Opportunities	Dropped	Percent of total grade
Attendance and participation	15	1	10
Reading reactions	12	1	15
Theory-in-context presentation	1	0	15
Milestones toward theory-based manuscript	9	1 (peer review cannot be dropped)	30
Completed theory-based manuscript (including in-class presentation)	1	0	30

#### Grading scale

	A 92.5-100	A- 90.0-92.49
B+ 87.0-89.99	B 83.0-86.99	B- 80.0-82.99
C+ 77.0-79.99	C 73.0-76.99	C- 70.0-82.99
D+ 67.0-69.99	D 63.0-63.99	D- 60.0-62.99

F lower than 60.0		
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## Assignments

### Reading reactions

You are to complete all the readings listed as on each week's Canvas page. You are expected to read everything listed under "required" before each class. After reading the material, you will submit a 1-page, single-spaced reaction paper on Canvas by 5:30 p.m. Monday.

In this reaction paper, I expect you to engage with the readings in a thoughtful way. Yes, criticize parts of the manuscript or chapter you think make assumptions, fail to consider perspectives, or lack rigor. But, also take its intellectual argument seriously and consider its implications and where it might lead. Do very little summarization. This is also a space to ask questions and to bring to attention parts you would like me to discuss during our course meeting. One page isn't a lot of space, so be synthetic. And, it's OK to spill onto a second page if you need to.

Here are the guidelines for in-class reflections to get the full credit:

- They are done individually
- It should be on-topic and use classroom-appropriate ideas and language
- It should be minimum 1-page, single-spaced, Times New Roman type 11 font
- It should have your name in the file name and at the top of the page
- It should be in full-sentence, cohesive paragraph form.
- The thoughts shared should be insightful, careful, and engaged with the text. Do very little summarizing.
- Draw in trends, phenomena, public policy debates and current events. Avoid relying too much on anecdotal or personal experiences.
- You do not need to include a works cited page if you only reference the texts assigned that week or in a previous week. However, do make clear which of the texts you are referencing in the body of the paper. If you pull from additional sources, such as materials you're reading in other courses, do include the full citation at the end of the document.
- It should be YOUR WORDS. Rephrase others' ideas into your original words to help you remember the ideas and to avoid plagiarism. Do not use extensive quotations.

### Theory-in-context presentation

During one course meeting between Weeks 3 and 12, you and a classmate will be assigned a "Theory-in-context presentation." We will choose those week assignments during Week 2. If you need to change your week after that, it is your responsibility to find another pair to switch schedules. We don't have enough time to do two presentations in one week.



The goal of the theory-in-context assignment is to dive more deeply into a specific communication theory, further explore research that expands that theory, and connect the theory to world phenomena. You and your partner should read the book chapter assigned for the week you are assigned to present and choose one theory or cluster of closely related theories. Then, develop a 45-minute presentation about that theory. This 45 minutes should include about 30 minutes where you teach the class about the theory followed by 15-minutes of class discussion. The presentation you and your partner develop should:

- Introduce the foundational literature of the theory. Who first developed the theory, what was early understanding and applications (at least one journal article or book)? What is the seminal literature that introduced this theory?
- Explore developmental literature of the theory. What are the must-cite manuscripts that expanded the theory, key developments, and cemented it in communication research? (At least three manuscripts.)
- Define key concepts and terms. What do we mean by the vocabulary used in the theory? (At least three manuscripts.)
- Introduce cutting-edge research. What has been done using this theory in the past five years? What are ways the literature has developed and matured? (At least three manuscripts.)
- Are there any meta-analyses regarding the theory? Introduce those and the conclusions we can draw from the evidence.
- What criticism has early or recent work on the theory received?
- Future research. What remains to be done to explore this theory? What don't we know? What new contexts or problems could this literature be applied to?
- Put the theory into context. What is a current trend, phenomenon, or policy debate where this theory could provide problem-solving guidance? How could this theory provide insight into today's human communication?
- Lead the class in a 15-minute engaged discussion about the current context of the theory. This means you do more than ask "Any questions?" but rather prepare questions, activities, or set up scenarios that get us talking and thinking about the theory in context.

To get full credit for the presentation, students need to:

- Show evidence of working collaboratively with your partner
- Inform the class in a clear, accurate and thorough way about the key concepts and mechanisms of the theory
- Demonstrate deep understanding of the theory through its developmental stages
- Provide insightful ideas about future directions for the theory's use
- Connect the theory to current phenomena
- Engage the class in thoughtful discussion
- Submit a completed APA style works cited document of the sources used in developing the presentation. These works cited documents will be distributed to the class as a resource.

Students leading the presentation will be graded on:

- Quality and accuracy of the information provided
- Logic and intellectual honesty of the theoretical explanation
- Organization and structure of the presentation
- Leadership while engaging the class in discussion

### **Theory-based research manuscript milestones**

As we advance through the course, you will submit short assignments that demonstrate your progress toward the final theory-based research proposal paper due at the end of the semester. These milestone assignments allow me to give feedback along the way and prevent you from waiting until the last minute to get started. We'll talk about each milestone assignment the week before it's due. These assignments include:

- Personal perspective statement on your views of ontology and epistemology (Week 3)
- 2 ideas for your theory-based research proposal (Week 5)
- Outline of paper (Week 7)
- Conceptualization for two key ideas (Week 8)
- Annotated bibliography of 10 sources (Week 9)
- 3 paragraphs of synthesization (Week 10)
- 3 pages of literature review (Week 11)
- 2 pages of introduction (Week 12)
- Peer review (Week 15)

### **Theory-based research manuscript**

Students will apply what they have learned by completing a conference-quality manuscript that takes the format of one of the four following options:

- 1) An empirical research proposal that takes the format of a thorough introduction, literature review and proposed methodology that would investigate a question of communication. It should conclude with a modified version of a discussion section that addresses the theoretical and practical implications that the expected results have. I would expect this to be about 15 pages, excluding references. We'll look at many examples of this in class.
- 2) A completed empirical research manuscript using secondary analysis. This is a full manuscript with results using an already available data set, but examines an original question regarding communication theory. If you choose this option, talk to me early in the semester. I expect this manuscript to be about 25 pages, excluding references.
- 3) A manuscript that conceptualizes or clarifies a communication theory. I expect this manuscript to be about 20 pages, excluding references. An example of this type of work is:
  - a) Hilligoss, B., & Rieh, S. Y. (2008). Developing a unifying framework of credibility assessment: Construct, heuristics, and interaction in context. *Information Processing & Management*, 44(4), 1467-1484.

4) A critical analysis of a communication theory or its concepts. This manuscript engages with a theory's past, present, and problems. It does more than synthesize the state of the theory. It goes further to introduce a new argument or perspective. I expect this manuscript to be about 20 pages, excluding references. An example of this type of work is:

- a) Scheufele, D. A. (1999). Framing as a theory of media effects. *Journal of Communication*, 49(1), 103-122.

Students will work toward the completion of the manuscript during the semester by meeting the milestones and learning from feedback. The completed manuscript will be graded on:

- Originality, novelty and importance of the idea
- Argumentative writing structures, including topic sentences, supporting evidence, and transitions
- Clarity, accuracy and organization of the writing
- Engagement with and use of theory
- Appropriate and complete use of literature
- Demonstration of conventions of academic writing
- Proper, complete, and thorough use of APA style

Along with the manuscript, students will create and execute a 10-minute presentation of their manuscript to be presented in either Week 15 or Week 16. The presentations will follow the conventions of an academic conference research session. Students will also participate in moderating and discussing the sessions. I will coordinate themed sessions and assign the date of the presentation as well as moderator and discussant duties.

Student presentations will be graded on:

- Timing -- don't go over
- Pacing of speech, clarity of speech, absence of fillers
- Organization and logic of presentation, including sign posting
- Appropriate language for the audience
- Non-verbal communication including eye contact and body language
- Ability to facilitate understanding and communicate key points
- Coordination of verbal and visual communication
- Organization and visual design of presentation aids (slides)
- Participation in discussions and fulfilling any assigned moderator or discussant duties

### Course outline

Week	Date	Faculty guest	Littlejohn chapter	Reading reaction due	Student presentations	Machi chapter	Milestone due
1	8/23/2022			No			
2	8/30/2022	Ivory	1 Foundations	Yes		Knowledge to the people (Introduction)	
3	9/6/2022	Horning	2 Frameworks	Yes		1 Select a topic (1)	Personal perspective
4	9/13/2022	Smith	3 Communicator	Yes		2 Standing on shoulders (3)	
5	9/20/2022	Woods/ Robinson	4 Message	Yes		3 APA intensive	2 research ideas
6	9/27/2022	Mielczarek	5 Medium	Yes		4 Survey the literature (4)	
7	10/4/2022	Watkins	6 Beyond human	Yes		5 Synthesization and argumentation (2)	Outline
8	10/11/2022	Hopkins	7 Relationship	Yes		6 Critique the literature (5)	2 concepts explored
9	10/18/2022	Logan	8 Group	Yes		7 Writing introductions	10 peer-reviewed sources
10	10/25/2022		9 Organization	Yes		8 Writing structures (6)	3 paragraphs of synthesization
11	11/1/2022		10 Health	Yes		9 Editing, revising	3 pages of lit review
12	11/8/2022		11 Culture	Yes		10 Reviewing	2 page introduction
13	11/15/2022		12 Society	Yes		Conferences and presentations	
14	11/22/2022		No Class - Thanksgiving	No			
15	11/29/2022		Presentations	No			Peer review
16	12/6/2022		Presentations	No			
Finals			Paper due				Completed paper

