

Communication Students' Ability to Conduct Graduate-Level Research

Communications MA – College of Communications

Step 1: Student Learning Outcome

All graduate students in the Department of Communications will demonstrate the ability to conduct graduate-level research using appropriate scholarly sources and applicable academic databases.

Step 2: Methods and Measures

In 2016-2017, assessment of students' knowledge of communications theories took place in COMM 500 (Theory and Literature of Communications), which is the introductory course for students enrolled in the M.A. program and combines instruction about how to be successful in graduate school with foundational information about the theories and literature of the Communications field.

The course culminates with a 15-20 page literature review research paper worth 35% of the course grade. The graduate assessment committee prepared a scoring rubric based on the assignment sheet for the paper which specifies APA style, 20+ sources, and the following:

- Introduction including background and statement of purpose;
- Assessment of existing literature, including appropriate theory;
- Research questions which haven't been covered in the existing literature;
- Suggestions for scholarly research; and
- Conclusion.

Each paper was scored by two members of the committee using the following ratings; Excellent (**E**), Satisfactory (**S**), Unsatisfactory (**U**), and Fail (**F**).

The chair of the committee then tallied the scores and calculated the percentages for the following summary categories;

- Quality of Components Overall
- APA Style and Format Overall
- Overall evaluation of the Written Assignment

Step 3: Criteria for Success

The graduate faculty sought to have 80% of graduate students' qualitative work rated as "satisfactory" or "excellent" in quality.

Step 4: Results

A total of 13 papers were assessed, with summary scores for each category as follows;

- **Quality of Components:** 96% performed at the "E" (48%) or "S" (48%) level, while "U" accounted for 4%.
- **APA Style and Format Overall:** 84% performed at the "E" (30%) or "S" (54%) level, with "U" (12%) and "F" (4%) - one review of one paper.
- **Overall Evaluation of the Written Assignment:** 92% performed at the "E" (46%) or "S" (46%) level, with "U" (4%) and "F" (4%) – one rating of one paper because two rating sheets were missing scores for this item.

With 92% of students' qualitative work rated as "S" or "E", performance exceeded the 80% threshold for meeting the outcome.

Step 5: Improvement Actions

While the results showed strong scores overall, there are areas that can be worked on in each of the main categories.

In “*Quality of Components*,” analysis revealed that some students may not have been able to make the leap from reading about theories in their textbook to using a theory to guide research or professional practice; a defining difference between most undergraduate study and graduate study. Although students demonstrated a grasp of possible research questions, there was a bit less understanding of how these questions might be answered by research. Regarding components of the written paper, the primary recommendation is to possibly increase attention to the function of each element of a research paper wherever feasible in the course, for example in preparing the students for the Journal Article Analysis assignment. After taking COMM 500, students take two research courses, COMM 508 and 509. These courses should solidify the students’ understanding of the role of theory in the development of research questions and research design.

In “*APA Style and Format*,” most of the students (69% =E and 27% =S) met the goal of 20 or more sources. This means they did a lot of reading of properly formatted published academic papers. For their own papers, however, most students did not include an abstract or have a proper APA cover page. The next weakest area was in-text citations with 77% rated E or S. To support improvement in this area, it is recommended that instructions go into greater detail about the elements of APA style expected by the graduate faculty, but also possibly list a point weight or percentage weight for errors in this important area of correct presentation.