

# COM 352 • PERSUASION

WEC • Fall 2007 • Friday evenings • Foss 42 classroom

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**Please note that COM 352 is now a “QR” skills course.  
Therefore, a prerequisite for the course is Math Placement Group 3.**

## GENERAL COURSE DESCRIPTION

As stressed in the first few pages of your course textbook, the subject of persuasion is very much relevant to your everyday lives. Sometimes you wish to influence other people; even more often, other people try to influence you. Therefore, I am convinced that this course has merit and can and will change the way you understand how people influence one another. In the contexts of sales and advertising, I'm even convinced that a course of this sort can at least pay for itself—you can save yourself real money by knowing how persuaders operate!

In the more “academic” sense, the study of persuasion has a long and proud tradition within the study of rhetoric and dates back more than 2000 years to Aristotle, Plato, and Cicero, among others. But theory and research in persuasion also has a quantitative, social scientific tradition that spans at least the last five decades. Although we will pay some attention to qualitative/rhetorical notions of persuasion, the main focus of this course will be on quantitative research.

Some quantitative research has focused on the **source**. For example:

- ❖ Are taller people more persuasive than shorter people?
- ❖ Are men more persuasive than women?
- ❖ What are the components of credibility for persuaders?

Other questions involve the **message**. For example:

- ❖ Can fear appeals persuade people?
- ❖ Are one-sided messages more effective than two-sided messages?
- ❖ Should one's strongest arguments appear at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of a persuasive message?

Still other research examines the **channel** of communication. For example:

- ❖ Are oral messages more persuasive than written ones?
- ❖ Are mass-mediated messages more effective than interpersonal, face-to-face messages?
- ❖ Are visual messages more effective than oral messages?

Finally, still other researchers have focused on the **receivers** of persuasion. For example:

- ❖ Are people with low self-esteem more vulnerable to persuasion than people with high self-esteem?
- ❖ Are young people easier to persuade than old people?
- ❖ Do audiences from the U.S. react differently to persuasive appeals than receivers from other cultures?

This course will examine these and many other questions connected to empirical research in persuasion.

### **REQUIRED READING**

• Robert Gass and John Seiter, Persuasion, Social Influence, and Compliance Gaining, 3rd ed., Pearson Education, 2007 (ISBN # 0-205-46216-2). Since this is the only text for the course, I expect a fairly "close" reading of it. Please note that it is the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition.

### **ATTENDANCE**

It is my expectation that you will miss, at most, one class session. There will be "informal" penalties for excessive absences--in particular, some reluctance to give you the "benefit of the doubt" if you are on the borderline between two final grades. There will also be one "formal" penalty: you will automatically not receive credit for the course if you miss four or more times, even if you have completed all assigned work. In short, coming to class regularly is one criterion for passing the course. If you do miss a class, be sure to find out what you missed; doing so is your responsibility.

### **MISSED EXAMS / LATE ASSIGNMENTS**

If you miss an exam, it is your burden to demonstrate that the reason for your absence was legitimate and compelling. If you do happen to miss an exam, it is your responsibility to make alternate arrangements. As for late assignments, all late work will be penalized, with the penalty to be determined by the particular circumstances.

### **PLAGIARISM**

Please remember that both written and oral assignments can involve issues of plagiarism. If you are borrowing the ideas and/or language of someone else in a paper or speech, you need to provide acknowledgment. Check the section dealing with plagiarism in the Augsburg College Guide and ask if you have any concerns. Penalties for plagiarism will be based on the circumstances of the situation and can range from a simple point deduction to failing the course.

### **GRADING**

Your final grade for the term will be based on (a) three in-class exams, and (b) three writing assignments. All three writing assignments will in some way be connected to quantitative research in persuasion.

Your grade will be based on the total number of points you accumulate during the term. Essentially, I will make a "class curve," but I will also take into account (1) percentage of total points, (2) how the point totals are clustered or distributed--i.e., if there are any "gaps" where it would be convenient to draw a line, (3) college grade guidelines, which suggest that a 3.0 is achievement "above basic course standards" and a 4.0 is achieving "the highest standards of

excellence," and (4) any "intangibles," such as perceived competence, attendance, class participation, etc.

In general, I use an "eclectic" method of grading, trying to make use of any available information that will help in determining grades. I should also note that I do not assume a "normal distribution curve"--in other words, I do not assume that the student with the lowest point total should fail the course, nor do I assume that the highest point total is automatically a 4.0 (although a 4.0 is clearly the most likely grade in this case). In general, though, I tend to be fairly generous on the "low end" of the grading scale (don't worry about failing if you do all of the written work and score at least 50 percent on the exams) and somewhat stingy on the "high end" (you'll need to really earn a 4.0). Although this sounds vague, I will try to give you feedback about grades along the way, and you are always free to consult me at any time during the term. Also, you cannot elect to "take a zero" on one or more assignments and expect to receive credit for the course.

## **GRADED ACTIVITIES (details subject to slight modification)**

### **EXAMS (200 points)**

The three non-cumulative exams in this course will include a combination of multiple choice and short answer questions. These exams will have a weight of 200 points, regardless of the actual number of questions. For example, if there are 150 points worth of questions on the three exams, and you get 120 correct (80 percent), your exam score for the term will be 160 (80 percent of 200).

#### **Exam #1 – October 5**

This exam will be based on:

- Gass & Seiter, chapters 1, 2, and 16
- whatever we do in class from September 7 - 21

#### **Exam #2 – November 2**

This exam will be based on:

- Gass & Seiter, chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, and 13
- whatever we do in class from October 5 – 19

#### **Exam #3 – December 7**

This exam will be based on:

- Gass & Seiter, chapters 7, 8, 11, 12, 14, and 15
- whatever we do in class from November 2 - 30

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** For all exams, you will be allowed to use both sides of a 4 x 6 note card (or 4 x 6 slip of paper) as an aid--put whatever you want on this "cheat sheet." I do think it is important to "internalize" a fair amount of information, but I do not expect you to memorize everything. My suggestion: put things on this card that are especially "troublesome" for you.

# WRITING ASSIGNMENTS (200 points)

## WRITING ASSIGNMENTS #1 AND #2 (60 points each)

To enhance your understanding of issues related to quantitative research, you must write three papers which examine academic journal articles dealing with persuasion. Another goal of these assignments is for you to become more familiar with scholarly work in the field of communication studies, and to become more familiar with the journals that house this research. As a result of these assignments, I would like you all to appreciate the many ways in which persuasion is examined in the scholarly community. Specific requirements:

- 1. For the FIRST paper, choose an article from the list below as the basis for your analysis—they all involve quantitative research. **This is due October 19.**
- 2. For the SECOND paper, discuss and analyze any of the hundreds of articles which are cited in the Gass and Seiter text. (Provide a complete bibliographic citation, and a photocopy of the article itself.) **This is due November 16.**
- 3. For BOTH papers, follow this general format:
  - (a) description and summary (about 3 pages) - explain what the article has to say. **It is essential that you do this in terms that an intelligent lay person would understand.** In other words, cut through all the academic mumbo-jumbo and write as a normal person would. Do not try to impress the reader with unnecessary technical jargon. Be clear, accurate, and concise--focus on key methods, ideas, and findings.
  - (b) application and/or criticism (3 pages) - in this section, you should address questions such as these:
    - What's your overall assessment of the article? What are its strengths and weaknesses?
    - Is the methodology sound? Be as specific as you can. Are there issues with respect to validity? Ways that variables are operationalized? Data collection and analysis?
    - In what ways, if any, does this article reinforce or contradict ideas in the text for the course, or the lectures? If it's consistent, in what ways? If it's contradictory in any way, who is "right," and why?
    - How does the article relate to persuasion? Does it have any implications for the messages that you might present, hear, read, or experience? Does the article help us understand the nature of persuasion? Are there any linkages that you can make to issues discussed in the text, or in class? How, specifically? Illustrate.
    - Could we actually use this information in some meaningful way? Could you yourself apply these ideas to an understanding of how persuasion works? Again, be specific.

In other words, don't just write a glorified "book report"--the main thing is to take the article and do something with it. Demonstrate some kind of thoughtfulness. If you do criticize the article, try to make criticisms that have some substance to them, and **be sure to pay special attention to the research methodology. A significant portion of your analysis must deal with issues connected to the research design and data collection and interpretation.**

- 3. Grading criteria:
  - (a) ability to clearly explain the article in your own words;
  - (b) ability to effectively criticize and/or apply the article; and
  - (c) quality and correctness of the writing itself.

Although all of these criteria are important, I'll place special emphasis on (b). Writing a clear summary of the article is relatively straightforward--the real question is, what does it all mean? Try to demonstrate your analytical skills, creative thinking, ability to see relationships among ideas, and, of course, your understanding of issues connected to quantitative research.

Please keep in mind that reporting on this article may well involve some additional research and/or checking--if, for example, there is something you do not understand, try to find out what it means. You may need to know a little more about the historical period being discussed, or the statistical procedures, or the definition of certain terms. Although some aspects of the article may be hard to fathom, even for a graduate student, I do hold you accountable to have a basic understanding of what it is reasonable to know. See me if you have any questions or concerns of this sort. Finally, remember that there are definite rules regarding plagiarism--passing off someone else's ideas and/or language as your own will be penalized. In extreme cases, this could result in no credit (or worse!). Remember to give credit where credit is due--that's what quotation marks are for.

### **LIST OF ARTICLES FOR FIRST JOURNAL REPORTS**

1. Cantor, J. (1979). Grammatical variations in persuasion: Effectiveness of four forms of request in door-to-door solicitations for funds. *Communication Monographs*, 46, 296-305.
2. Cantor, J. & Omdahl, B. (1999). Children's acceptance of safety guidelines after exposure to televised dramas depicting accidents," *Western Journal of Communication*, 63, 57-71.
3. Cragan, J. & Shields, D. (1977). Foreign policy communication dramas: how mediated rhetoric played in Peoria in campaign '76. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 63, 274-289
4. Dixon, T. and Linz, D. (1997). Obscenity law and sexually explicit rap music: understanding the effects of sex, attitudes, and beliefs. *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 25, 217-241.
5. Hirokawa, R. & Miyahara, A. (1986). A comparison of influence strategies utilized by managers in American and Japanese organizations. *Communication Quarterly*, 34, 250-265.
6. Ma, R. & Chuang, R. (2001). Persuasion strategies of Chinese college students in interpersonal contexts. *Southern Communication Journal*, 66, 267-278.
7. Meyers, R, Brashers, D., Winston, L., and Grob, L. (1997). Sex differences and group argument: a theoretical framework and Empirical Investigation. *Communication Studies* 48, 19-41.
8. Miles, E. & Leathers, D. (1984). The impact of aesthetic and professionally-related objects on credibility in the office setting. *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 49, 361-379.

9. Miller, G., Bolster, F., Roloff, M., & Seibold, D. (1977). Compliance-gaining message strategies: A typology and some findings concerning effects of situational differences. *Communication Monographs*, 44, 37-51.
10. Morman, M. (2000). The influence of fear appeals, message design, and masculinity on men's motivation to perform the testicular self-exam. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 28, 91-116.
11. Parrott, R., Lemieux, R., Harris, T., & Foreman, L. (1997). Interfacing interpersonal and mediated communication: Use of active and strategic self-disclosure in personal ads. *Southern Communication Journal*, 62, 319-332.
12. Siltanen, S. (1981). The persuasiveness of metaphor: A replication and extension," *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 47, 67-83.
13. Sparks, G., Pellechia, M., & Irvine, C. (1998). Does television news about UFOs affect viewers' UFO beliefs?: An experimental investigation. *Communication Quarterly*, 46, 284-294.
14. Trost, M., Langan, E., and Kellar-Guenther, Y. (1999). Not Everyone Listens When You "Just Say No": Drug Resistance in Relational Context. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 27, 120-138.
15. Witte, K. and Morrison, K. (1995). Using scare tactics to promote safer sex among juvenile detention and high school youth. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 23, 128-142.

### **WRITING ASSIGNMENT #3 (80 points) – due December 7**

For this assignment, you will be a quantitative researcher and social scientist. You will need to develop a brief research project (fairly narrow in scope) in which you do some sort of quantitative "content analysis" of a set of persuasive messages in the public forum. Please note that you should do a quantitative analysis of a set of messages—**this project does not call for and should not involve "human subjects" (most notably, any type of survey research or laboratory research in which data are collected from people)**. For example, you might do a quantitative study of television commercials, TV newscasts, newspaper editorials, political speeches, "personal ads," college recruitment brochures, letters to the editor, commercial jingles, websites, magazine ads, and so on. If this will help, articles #4 and #11, listed above for the first writing assignment, are examples of this type of research—although they are obviously more technical and more sophisticated than your project will be.

This paper (suggested length: 8-10 pages) should include these components:

1. **Statement of a specific research question or questions.** Here your language needs to be very precise: what exactly are you trying to determine? (By the way, for reasons that will be discussed in class, I think it is more appropriate here to provide "research questions" rather than "hypotheses.")

2. **Explanation of your research method.** How do you intend to answer this research question? What type(s) of quantitative methods will you employ, and why?

3. **Data collection and analysis.** Now that you've collected your data, what are the results? What does it mean? Your data presentation does not have to be highly sophisticated and technical, but it should be clear. Consider graphs and tables as one way to help the reader in this regard.

4. **Discussion.** Looking back on what you've done, what parts of the study were well-executed? What aspects could have been done differently, and perhaps better? What issues connected to quantitative research are relevant to your study?

In general, use the basic format that is employed for most any journal article in the social sciences. The articles that are the foundation for the first two papers should help show you how to proceed. The main differences between these "real" articles and your paper are (a) that you will not have an extensive "literature review" before presenting your methodology, and (b) you should devote more space and pay more attention to possible "mistakes" in your work—I do not expect your project to be perfect by any means, but I do expect that you can identify in specific ways those things that didn't go quite right and how one might address these problems.

A "good" project will have a clear focus. It will be orderly and systematic. The way in which the variables are operationalized will seem reasonable. The data collection will be intelligible. And because you are doing academic research, you will strive to be objective—this is not a situation where you are trying to "prove a point" or "make an argument," although you may well draw some conclusions from the data you gather.

Since this is designed to be a project involving quantitative reasoning, I would expect in most cases that your sample of messages should be appropriately large. Doing a study with 5 or 10 messages as your data set is probably insufficient.

**I expect a one-page statement regarding your plans for this project by November 16.** (This is something you don't want to be doing at the last minute!) **Failure to provide one will mean an automatic eight-point deduction (10% of the total points) in your final score on the project.** Also, it's expected that you will share your findings with the class, informally, for a couple of minutes on December 7. This is not for a grade, but failure to say anything about your project will mean a five-point deduction in your score.

Finally, you are welcome to team up with another person to execute this project. If you choose this option, you'll need to write a longer paper, and you'll both receive the same score. Do give me a formal "heads up" if you are planning to work with another person.

**FINAL NOTE: There is no formal assignment for the first class meeting, but you are encouraged to buy the text and start reading it, and to carefully go through this syllabus, prior to September 7.**