

introduction to communication research

second edition

John Reinard

introduction to **communication** research

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John C. Reinard

California State University, Fullerton



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INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

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PREFACE

In the preface to the first edition of this book, I wrote:

Research is not library work.
Nor is it statistics.
Nor is it field observation.

Research is an argument. In particular, communication research is a process by which we answer questions and try to draw conclusions from information gathered about message-related behavior.

With the advent of the information superhighway, these words are truer today than ever. The major task in learning research methods involves developing skills that help us sift through the information that is available so that we can make reasoned claims based on data. Solid research has lines of argument that are expected for different sorts of claims to be made legitimately. Students need to know how to evaluate these lines of argument and how to construct them. This concern is shared by many fields in modern colleges and universities, but it is central in the study of communication research methods.

Thus, this introductory volume provides information on the tools of scholarship (libraries, statistics, and fieldwork) to help students learn ways to find and assess high quality evidence. This book attempts to train students to gather research evidence, develop research arguments, and think critically about them. In short, this book is designed to teach students how to “do scholarship,” make reasoned cases, and offer research conclusions.

Whereas the first edition of this book represented the product of many years of experimentation with these instructional materials, the second edition benefits from the formal feedback of instructors and students who praised the book’s student-friendly approach and paid the author the compliment of recommending further refinements in the work’s structure and coverage of concepts, especially relating to new technology.

Those familiar with the previous edition will note some changes in this book.

- Chapters on definitions and theory and on measurement of variables have been moved to an early location in the book. Now students can study the conceptual foundations of communication research and see the link to measurement of variables before immersing themselves in the specific methods of different research approaches.
- Scores of examples have been updated and many examples from communication research have replaced those drawn from other fields. References to examples unlikely to be in the experience of students have been replaced.
- Material on communication resources has been completely revised in light of the avalanche of new resources that have hit the field during the last few short years. New library and “electronic library” resources unimaginable in the past are items of everyday experience to modern students.

- Discussion of ethical issues in research, such as deception, confidentiality, and informed consent issues are expanded in the boxed discussions called “A Question of Ethics” found throughout the text.
- New material on the use of focus groups in research appears.

Surely the most exciting recent influence on students’ research is the Internet. This second edition includes practical suggestions on how to use the Internet to enrich research efforts.

A Student Study Guide is now available with this textbook. The Study Guide includes

- information on writing and usage to promote effective communication in papers and scholarship
- information on applying the APA reference style
- sample student papers that illustrate the form that many research arguments may take (including not only typical examples, but at least one composite poor example)
- applied assignment study sheets that provide students with opportunities to develop skills in analyzing and composing research

Many things that teachers and students have found praiseworthy about this book remain. First and foremost, this book is written for—and to—students who are taking their first course in research methods, typically on the sophomore or junior levels. By the end of the academic term, students should know how to do at least a couple of things.

- Students should know how to present and evaluate a research argument. Since most classes that follow the research methods course require research-based writing by the students, students need to know how to complete the process of drawing conclusions and making arguments from the literature.
- Students should know how to deal with the brass tacks of research: how to isolate a problem statement; how to distinguish inde-

pendent and dependent variables; how to criticize and evaluate definitions; what theories are and why they are important; how to use the library and electronic resources; how to apply methods of sound research and standards for evaluating and proposing worthwhile studies; how to compose scholarship; how to collect data and execute a rudimentary, but logical design; and how to analyze simple data.

Second, to avoid overwhelming students with detailed elements of each methodological twist in communication research, this textbook spends time teaching the “survival skills” that students need to know, supplemented with clearly identified enrichment information labelled as “Special Discussions.” The topics covered in these discussions range from such things as ways of knowing to statistical packages for the analysis of data. Third, this book uses research examples from the broad range of communication studies. Since communication research courses serve students from several communication areas—including speech communication, journalism, telecommunications, public relations, and speech and hearing science—examples from all these areas are deliberately included in discussions of content. Fourth, to assist students, the textbook format is designed to promote efficient study and review. Each chapter

- starts with a preview of all major topics;
- opens with an orienting paragraph to describe the thrust of the chapter;
- ends with a list of key terms to review when studying the chapter;
- includes margin notes to point out important concepts covered in the text;
- highlights key terms in boldface the first time they appear;
- relies on tables when they may reduce otherwise extended text discussions;
- concludes with a summary that is an actual and detailed chapter synopsis, which students will find very helpful when reviewing for examinations.

In addition, a glossary is included to help students define critical terms swiftly (these terms appear in **boldface**).

This textbook is divided into four sections that correspond to the major units successfully taught in introductory communication research methods courses. The first section introduces the field of communication as a research area. Students are guided through two chapters that introduce communication research as a distinct form and that review the issues involved in composing communication research problems, using hypotheses, and isolating types of variables.

The second part of the textbook deals with the rudiments of research reasoning. This section begins with a chapter concerning conceptualizations in communication research including use of theory and definitions. A second chapter in this section describes measurement in communication so that students understand the transition from conceptualization to operationalization in research. A third chapter deals with “Using Communication Research Sources” and focuses on library research skills, strategies, and using the Internet. This chapter emphasizes hands-on skills that students need almost immediately. A fourth chapter emphasizes a point of view for the book by addressing methods to compose communication research, including understanding the anatomy of a research article and mechanics of writing different forms of scholarly and classroom reports. The final chapter in this section addresses the communication research argument with an emphasis on the critical thinking skills that are taught in the introductory research methods course. This chapter describes the nature of the research argument and ways to evaluate research reasoning and evidence.

The third section of the book emphasizes the design of both qualitative and quantitative research studies (though most space is spent on quantitative methods since neophyte students tend to be least conversant with these tools). The primary task in this section lies in presenting essential materials that students need to know most, without ignoring other unique applications that have invigorated the field.

Five chapters are dedicated to these research building-blocks. The first two chapters in this section deal with conducting textual analyses of messages and undertaking participant observation studies. The third and fourth chapters concern designing descriptive empirical research (including questionnaire and interview studies) and conducting experimental studies. The remaining chapter involves sampling in communication research. In each case, examples across the broad realm of communication studies are covered.

The fourth part of the book concerns statistical analysis of data. The individual chapters involve traditional topics of such an introductory treatment. The first chapter addresses beginning descriptive and correlational statistics. The second chapter introduces the logic of statistical hypothesis testing and applies it to the case of comparisons between two means. The final chapter extends significance testing to cases that go beyond two means, including analysis of variance and chi square tests. In this final chapter, special discussions include “survival guide” introductions to advanced statistics that students may read, but should not be expected to use in the introductory course.

Many people helped me develop this work. My sincere thanks must go to my own teachers of research methods. These teachers included not only those who provided instruction in empirical methods, but those who directed my studies in rhetorical theory, argumentation, and qualitative methods. My students of introductory research methods courses for more than a decade deserve thanks since this book and the Student Study Guide reflect the product of experimenting with them to find ways to teach this course most effectively. I am very grateful to the scholars and teachers who reviewed drafts of this work and provided invaluable advice and support for the direction of this project. Sharmila Pixy Ferris, William Peterson College, Wayne, New Jersey; Dr. Susan A. Holton, Bridgewater State College, Bridgewater, Massachusetts; and Rebecca Ann Lind, University of Illinois at Chicago offered invaluable insights in preparing this second edition, in addition to those who gave expert criticism and

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SECTION I

Introduction to the Field

1

The Role of Research in Communication

2

Communication Problem Statements and Hypotheses



The Role of Research in Communication

If politics is the art of the possible, research is surely the art of the soluble.

—Sir Peter Medawar

WHAT IS RESEARCH IN COMMUNICATION?

Research
Communication Research

THE CHALLENGES OF COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

The Breadth Challenge

THE MULTIPLE METHODS CHALLENGE

The Scholarly Rigor Challenge
The Personal Challenge
The Ethical Challenge
The Structure of the Field
Challenge

BEFORE WE GET STARTED . . .

Welcome to communication research! Though you may be skeptical, “doing” communication scholarship is an exciting and very enjoyable personal experience. Rather than just accepting what others tell you, you will learn how scholars (a term that includes you now) draw conclusions in our field. You will see how research should look so that you can evaluate the stuff that often gets passed off to us. Along the way, you will learn how to improve your thinking, your scholarly writing, and your ability to evaluate research arguments. Getting there can be challenging, but it is well worth the trip. This book does not assume that you have any background in research methods—just an interest. To get started, you need to know why you are here and what communication research is. This chapter is designed to get you moving in the right direction.

WHAT IS RESEARCH IN COMMUNICATION?

A field defines itself by its research. Research determines what content is taught in courses, the social contributions the field makes, and the sort of publicity an area gets.

Research

Research is the systematic effort to secure answers to questions. These questions are not mundane ones, such as, Have you seen my keys? or Want to see a movie? Instead, research questions deal with issues requiring reference to data¹ and information, such as, Did Patrick Henry deliver the “Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death!” speech?² Do women self-disclose private information more often than men do?³ and Do people who arrive “fashionably late” to parties receive higher credibility ratings than people who arrive on time?⁴ Research is not an ivory tower activity conducted by a few elect scholars. It is a very practical effort to get answers for questions. Research usually requires examining past inquiry into an issue. We often rely on reports found in libraries to learn about related work and to avoid repeating past mistakes. Regardless of sources of information, all research involves gathering information that goes beyond personal feelings or hunches. We search for some light on the facts of matters when we do research.

research defined

Sometimes people distinguish two types of research. **Basic research** is completed to learn about relationships among variables, regardless of any immediate commercial product or service. Most things we call “pure” scientific research fall into this category. Though researchers hope to make useful contributions, no economic payoffs are imminent. **Applied research** is completed to develop a product or solve an immediately practical problem. When communication researchers survey employee attitudes as part of a consulting contract, the work is considered applied research. Even so, trying to separate basic and applied research causes problems. Regardless of whether pure or applied research is involved, the methods of inquiry *are identical*. Furthermore, last year’s basic research may be today’s source of new products. Work that aimed to find out how to store information in digital form is now the basis for patents on satellite transmission of television signals. Though the terms have their place, for our purposes it is enough to know that good research can be basic or applied.

basic research defined

applied research distinguished

Communication Research

Regrettably, some people have difficulty separating communication research from work in psychology, sociology, or literature. They figure that since “meanings are in people” (Berlo, 1960, p. 175), any study of people is communication research. Straightening out this exaggerated view has taken some serious thinking. In 1968 a group of communication scholars met in New Orleans under a grant from the National Science Foundation to wrestle with the basic issues of distinguishing communication research and instruction. They concluded that “research in speech-communication focuses on the ways in which messages link participants during

communication research defined in New Orleans conference

¹ Let’s get something straight right now. The word “data” is plural. Thus, we have to say, “data *are*” and “data *were*,” NOT “data *is*” and “data *was*.” A single piece of data is called a datum, but people do not use that word very often. Instead they refer to a datum as “a piece of data,” a usage which sounds natural to most people.

² He didn’t.

³ They do.

⁴ We don’t know.

SPECIAL DISCUSSION 1-1

Behavior of Researchers

It is possible to overstate the matter, but there is a set of norms—almost a culture—that distinguishes most people who do research. In his book *Foundations of Behavioral Research* (1986), Fred Kerlinger described these characteristics.

Universalism: Scientific laws are the same everywhere. A scientific law states a relation between phenomena that is invariable under the same conditions.

Organized skepticism: Researchers are responsible for verifying the results on which they base their work. [Researchers do not accept claims blindly. They question research claims and offer criticism for each other.]

Communality: Researchers are willing to share knowledge freely and contribute to public knowledge.

Disinterestedness: Researchers must ban ulterior motives and be relatively free from bias. Any known or possible biases must not be admitted. [*Disinterested* does not mean *uninterested*—it only means that one can be impartial because one does not have a financial or personal stake in the outcome. Certainly, researchers do not study matters without passion. They care. But, they must be willing to let their conclusions be influenced by the data and by the data only. If a researcher receives a grant from sponsors who specify the results they wish the researcher to find, the researcher loses the “disinterest” that separates research from ordinary pandering.] (Kerlinger, 1986, p. 9)

interactions” (Kibler & Barker, 1969, p. 33). The scope of our research area was clear. Other fields may study personality traits, trends in society, medicine, or the beauty of poetry. Communication research is a specialty that studies message-related behavior.

Communication might be defined as “the process by which participants transact and assign meaning to messages” (Reinard, 1991, p. 4). You may be asked by a relative or acquaintance what your major is. If you answer “communication,” you might receive a puzzled expression in response. Unless you explain, they may think you are learning to install telephones. Instead you might say you are training to be a “message specialist” or “message scientist.” You may also explain that your concentration in communication prepares you in a specific area of communication. To be clear, you need to explain that a **message** is the set of verbal and nonverbal cues communicators exchange. **Verbal cues** are the words people use in communication. Sometimes people confuse “verbal” cues with “spoken” cues (as in the phrase *verbal agreement*). Yet, spoken cues are specifically called “oral cues” (from the “orifice” or mouth). **Nonverbal cues** are communication elements beyond the words themselves. Variations in voice, facial expression, gesture, movement, touch, timing, physical closeness, media treatments, and format are all nonverbal cues. Taken together, these verbal and nonverbal cues provide plenty for us to study.

communication
studies message
related behavior as a
specialty

messages composed
of:

1. verbal cues

2. nonverbal cues

THE CHALLENGES OF COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Communication covers a very broad set of topics, and no single research method is embraced by the field. To study communication—even its specialties of journalism, and speech and hearing science—we must have very broad knowledge. This breadth both challenges students and invites them to enter the field and make contributions.

The Breadth Challenge

The number of communication applications can seem enormous, but there really is a rational order to it. James H. McBath and Robert C. Jeffrey (1978) were asked to identify the professional areas in communication on behalf of the National Communication Association and the National Center For Educational Statistics, which were trying to organize information about careers in many fields. The list of communication specialties used by the NCES is shown in Table 1.1. The left column shows the official taxonomy.⁵ In the column to the right you will see some of the sorts of research possible in each of these areas. As you can tell, each area is broad enough to promote many interesting studies.

communication covers a broad set of topics

TABLE 1.1 Communication Specialties

Communication Taxonomy (McBath & Jeffrey, 1978)	Description of Research Possibilities (Crawford, 1980, with permission)
1. The Broad Areas of Mass Media Communication:	
Advertising	The study of mass media methods of influence to promote a product, service, or cause
Communication Technology	The study of the mechanisms and technologies of mass media
Communication Policy	The study of public policy and regulation of mass media communication and freedom of speech
Film as Communication	The role of popular and technical cinema in society
Journalism	The study of the methods of reporting and organizing news for presentation in print media
Public Relations	The study of methods of managing publicity and press relations for an organization, person, or cause
Radio	The study of the methods and uses of radio
Television	The study of the methods and uses of televised communication
2. Specific Areas of Speech Communication Research:	
Code Systems	The study of the uses of verbal and nonverbal symbols and signs in human communication

⁵ Well, almost. A couple of areas have been added here, including conflict management, journalism, radio and television, and public relations. In the original effort, mass communication careers already were distinguished from other careers in communication.

TABLE 1.1 —*Continued*

Communication Taxonomy	Description of Research Possibilities
Intercultural Communication	The study of communication among individuals of different cultural backgrounds
Interpersonal Communication	The study of communication interactions occurring in person-to-person and small group situations
Conflict Management	The study of the role of communication in the creation and control of conflict
Organizational Communication	The study of interrelated behaviors, technologies, and systems functioning within an organization
Oral Interpretation	The study of literature through performance involving the development of skilled verbal and nonverbal expression based on critical analysis of written texts (aesthetics of literature in performance, criticism of literature in performance, group performance, oral traditions)
Pragmatic Communication	The study and practice of communication, the object of which is to influence or facilitate decision making
Argumentation	The study of reason-giving behavior
Debate	The study of decision making in which adversaries present arguments for decision by a third party
Discussion and Conference	The study of methods of decision making in which participants strive by consensus to discuss and explore an issue
Parliamentary Procedure	The study of the means used to handle deliberation in large, legislative bodies through the use of formal rules and procedures to regulate debate and discussion
Persuasion	The study of methods used to influence the choices made by others
Public Address	The study of speakers and speeches, including the historical and social context of platforms, campaigns, and movements
Rhetorical and Communication Theory	The study of the principles that account for human communicative experiences and behavior
Communication Education	The study of communication in pedagogical contexts (communication development, oral communication skills, instructional communication)
Speech and Hearing Science	The study of the physiology and acoustical aspects of speech and hearing (biological aspects of speech and hearing, phonological aspects of speech and hearing, physiological aspects of speech and hearing)