COMMUNICATION RESEACH BACKGROUNDER

This DRAFT document (developed in consultation with Kathleen McConnell) is designed to help you write your COMM 101 Initial Reflection Essay and Course Project. Read it carefully and feel free to point out any questions, concerns, or suggestions for clarification.

What is communication studies literature?

Students of legal history may recall Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's famous answer to the challenge of defining pornography: "I know it when I see it." All too often, you may find yourself confronting a similarly vague definition when trying to define something as potentially nebulous as "communication studies literature." From an academic perspective, you're searching for the kinds of rigorous and credible material that will help you answer specialized questions related to human communication - most likely materials published in peer reviewed scholarly articles. Yet one problem remains: that broad venue of human experience called "communication."

Communication studies is an interdisciplinary field, after all. Our scholars and practitioners strive to forge useful connections among seemingly disparate ideas that stretch across traditional knowledge boundaries. Accordingly our publications often include citations from philosophy, anthropology, political science, and psychology (just to name a few). Moreover, we hope that our work will be cited and used in fields well beyond our own. Even so, if you're hoping to write as a communication scholar – or at least to master some aspect of this field – you should demonstrate more than a passing familiarity with our professors read and publish. But where to begin?

To begin, choose the correct database. Emphasizing that you should acclimate yourself with a *wide* range of research tools that reside within and beyond our field, you are wise to start with a resource like Communication & Mass Media Complete. This robust online database allows you to search the contents of more than 800 journals, many providing full-text articles. Access this database, select options for "full text" and "peer reviewed," and you can't go too far wrong.

A more practical answer to this question, though, comes from experience. To know communication studies literature you must *read* communication studies literature. Thus, you might review an article assigned in one of your current classes. Study the article carefully for content and form, but also peruse it as an example of communication studies literature. What journals are most frequently cited? After a while, you'll find frequent references to national-level journals such as *Quarterly Journal of Speech* and *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. You'll also spot frequent appearances of regional-level journals like *Western Journal of Communication* and *Southern Communication Journal*. These are the kinds of journals you should consult.

Keep reading, with particular focus on who's citing whom, and you'll become more confident in your own research choices.

What's the point of a literature review?

Chances are, you're reading this because you've been asked to write a literature review in one of your classes. Accordingly you could conclude that the literature review is solely a process of research, little more. Find some research, organize it, type up the requisite number of pages, and you're done, right? Well, probably not. When you write a literature review only to complete an assignment, sort of the way you might swallow sour medicine, you will almost inevitably find the result hard to digest. As with almost anything worth doing well, you should write a literature review with a purpose that transcends mere completion. Ask yourself, "What's the real *point* of this thing?"

The literature review is an essential component of academic writing because of its ability to help you define yourself and convey what you know. The review allows you to orient readers to a set of published articles, but it also allows you to establish yourself as a trustworthy professional. The care with which you gather, summarize, organize, and evaluate published ideas can help generate confidence, not only in those articles but also in *you* as a thinker and writer. Naturally you do not seek a university degree only to rephrase the ideas of other people. Yet to gain the trust of potential readers, you often must borrow a bit from the credibility of experts. A literature review helps you do that.

A well-crafted review can position you to join or challenge a community of scholars, showcasing the degree to which you understand their ideas; it can help you to support or oppose public policy or law, enabling you to marshal compelling research to prove your claims; and it can guide your analysis of public life and popular culture, ensuring that you can draw from previously established ideas while giving credit to their originators. In short, a literature review adds credibility to your writing and your persona. It's therefore important to get it right. Want to learn more? I wrote a blog-post that may help:

> *Wood Writing Guide*: Literature Reviews: http://bit.ly/17A1J59

Writing a Research Question or a Hypothesis

Though an effective literature review is key to academic research, your ultimate goal is to make an original and insightful claim about human sense-making. If you're planning to use one of the more *qualitative* theories of communication, you'll probably find that an open-ended [lacking a yes-no answer] RQ is useful. Here are three examples:

> RQ1: How do MSNBC producers organize stories to advance a specific political agenda?
>
> RQ2: How do Katy Perry's lyrics produce a feminist response to patriarchy?
>
> RQ3: How do the authors of successful online dating profiles bolster their perceived credibility?

If you're planning to use one of the more *objective* theories of communication, you're more likely to organize your research around a hypothesis that allows you to test a claim (usually by manipulating a variable). Here are three examples:

> H1: Watching more than eight hours of television a day causes children to interpret the world as hostile.
>
> H2: Students retain more content when their teachers employ close physical proximity.
>
> H3: Doctors who violate interpersonal expectations are more likely to inspire their patients to pursue long-term changes in diet and exercise.

However you proceed, you should employ a communication theory as a guide, and you should ensure that theory-specific language appears in your research question or hypothesis.

Using Theory-Specific Language

When your hypothesis or research question includes theory-specific language, you provide essential information about the method that will guide your inquiries – and you increase the likelihood that your findings will be specific and useful. So, how do you weave theory-specific language into your academic work? In COMM 101, the first step is to review textbook chapters. If you're using Em Griffin's *A First Look at Communication Theory*, you'll notice that the first four chapters provide overview information. Search the chapters that follow to find specific theories.

To illustrate what I mean, let me walk you through a thinking process involving some research on a significant pop culture figure. Let's choose Lady Gaga. Now if I were interested in qualitative methods of communication, I might produce the following first draft:

> RQ1: How does Lady Gaga use her music to influence her fans?

Sounds OK, right? It's got a topic (Lady Gaga) and a hint of an artifact (music), and there's an object (the fans affected by the music). It's good, but it must be more precise. I'll try some revision by being more specific about the artifact. Something like:

> RQ1a: How does Lady Gaga use her videos to influence her fans?
>
> Or
>
> RQ1b: How does Lady Gaga use her lyrics to influence her fans?

Better, right? I've got a topic and a slightly more specific artifact, but I'm just getting started.

Eventually I'll need to answer, "*What* videos or *what* lyrics?" Fortunately I can wait to address those questions until later in class. For now I need to convey my epistemological stance more clearly. Since an RQ or hypotheses should include theory-specific language, I still need to replace general verbs like "use" and "influence" with at least one specific verb that conveys a particular communication theory. Let's see that last draft again:

RQ1b: How does Lady Gaga use her lyrics to influence her fans?

See those verbs: "use" and "influence"? They're not bad, but they're *generic*. In other words, they reveal no particular theory of communication. To revise my RQ, I should now flip through the textbook and search for that language. Sure, this may seem like a real hassle, but trust me: Reviewing the textbook now (scanning, not necessarily reading every word) will save you from wasted effort later in the semester.

So let's imagine that I'm flipping through the book with my draft RQ. I see a chapter on rhetoric, but it doesn't speak to me. I see a chapter on speech codes, but I just can't feel it. Then I spot a chapter on dramatism. I shout loudly enough to wake the cat: "*Awesome!* Lady Gaga is certainly into *drama!*"

Now I flip through the chapter about dramatism. I don't read it word for word (yet) but I get a sense of what's going on. There's something about how an "agent" can influence a "scene," and then I spot something about "identification," which refers to how some performers create "common ground" between themselves and their audiences. *Aha!* I can use that idea to edit my verb from general to theory-specific.

RQ1c: "How does Lady Gaga's lyrics inspire identification with her fans?"

Much better. This RQ meets the expectations for COMM 101.

- The RQ states a specific topic (Lady Gaga)
- The RQ includes least the hint of some artifact (lyrics) and an object (her fans)
- The RQ uses communication theory-specific language ("identification")

Remember, I didn't just make up that verb-clause; I found this language ("identification") in a chapter that's likely to provide me a method to answer my RQ. From this approach, I can produce original research that answers an interesting question in a scholarly way. And if my epistemological stance leans more toward objective research, I can use the same approach to write a solid hypothesis too. Best of all, you can too.

Need a bit more help with this stuff? Check out a blog-post I wrote about communication research. It's called "Indiana Jones and the Lost Research Question." Here's the link:

Wood Writing Guide: Indiana Jones and the Lost Research Question: http://bit.ly/17AbkZy