

COMM 4020: Communication Theory

Fall 2025

Instructor: Dr. Karen Anderson-Lain
E-mail: karen.anderson-lain@unt.edu

Office: GAB 302
Office Hours: Tue 11am-12:30pm; Wed.
10am-11:30am; and by Appointment

Course Description:

This course explores the nature and function of theory across the communication studies discipline. This course is reading and writing intensive. You should be prepared to spend significant time reading, reflecting, and writing about challenging material. I hope that this course and the readings challenge you to consider the following questions:

- ❑ How do you know what you know?
- ❑ How does communication relate to the world?
- ❑ How do we as a society create knowledge?
- ❑ What role does communication play in creating knowledge?

Course Goals and Objectives:

The primary goal of this course is to understand what theory is and how it is connected to scholarship. Thus, the following specific objectives will be achieved in this course:

- ❑ Understand the role of theory, how theory is evaluated, various approaches to theory in communication studies discipline, and how theory is used in research.
- ❑ Critically evaluate theory
- ❑ Apply a specific theory to a communication event/artifact

Prerequisites

COMM 2020: Interpersonal Communication

Required Texts

Littlejohn, S. W., Foss, K. A., & Oetzel, J. G. (2021). *Theories of Human Communication, 12th Edition*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.

You may use the 11th edition but some theories we cover in class may not be included.

Communication

All office hours and appointments will be held in-person (Zoom by request). Email is my preferred method of contact. Please allow 24 hours response time during the week. I do not respond to emails over the weekend. So, if you send an email Friday afternoon do not expect a response until Monday. **Please include your course number, specific section number of the course, and your full name in all e-mails.**

Please use my official email instead of Canvas messenger. Karen.anderson-lain@unt.edu.

If you have a private question, please contact me via email and I will respond within 24 hours on weekdays (usually sooner). Please do not expect a response over the weekend.

Course Policies:

Class Attendance and Participation

Attendance and participation are expected. In order to be successful in this course you will need to come to class prepared, readings completed, and ready to engage in discussion. *Attendance will be taken daily and will impact journal/participation grades.* Excessive absences (more than three) will result in a warning and a deduction of 10 points per class period missed from your journal/participation grade.

Respect

In this class, respecting one another is essential to an effective learning environment. This classroom is a space in which students are encouraged to engage in open dialogue, and that will NOT be met with any form of disrespect. Throughout the semester, this course will cover topics that may cause some uncomfortable feelings, tension, and even disagreement; however, students are expected to have constructive, respectful conversations. There is a ZERO tolerance policy for disrespecting your peers. It is imperative that students engage with the material with a willingness to learn, participate, and exit their comfort zone with an open mind. Doing so will shape students into better, more empathetic communicators.

Mistakes

In order to cultivate an online environment fostering critical thinking and collaborative learning, we need to make room for mistakes. As humans living through a uniquely stressful period in which sociocultural inequities intersect with a global pandemic producing uneven resources and varying levels of access to support, **we will all make mistakes.** When we do, it is important to learn from them without the expectation that we ourselves, or others, will have the “perfect” response.

Intent vs. Impact

When we make mistakes, it is imperative to focus on how our words, actions, and responses impact others, in spite of our best intentions. When we focus on intent, the experience of the person affected by the comment or action is invalidated, inherently privileging the feelings of the person responsible for the comment/action, often producing disconnection. However, when we focus on how our words and actions impact others, the experience of the person affected is centered, creating space for apology, growth, and connection. While the “perfect” responses are never the expectation for ourselves or others, centering the impact of our words and actions when we make mistakes is an opportunity to engage in self-reflection, reflexivity, and a deeper understanding of what it means to be in community with others.

Late Work/ Missed Assignments

Each student has an automatic extension of **48 hours** on writing assignments. Thus, if the assignment is due on Thursday at 11:59pm you can turn it in without penalty by Saturday at 11:59pm. If you turn it in after the automatic extension you will receive a zero for the assignment. No other extensions will be considered. This is to help keep us on track. *Extensions do not apply to EXAMS.*

Handing in Work

Formal writing assignments (e.g., Annotations & Final Paper) must be **typed** and **double-spaced** unless otherwise specified. **Assignments, which do not follow these guidelines, will not be graded.** Page length guidelines are based on 12-point Times New Roman Font 1 inch margins expectation (So if you want to use Courier New add a few pages to the requirements). Think hard about self-presentation and impression formation as you put together your assignments. You must use APA format. APA format is not required for journal entries.

Plagiarism & Originality:

As noted in the University policies, using someone else's words as your own is plagiarism and using your own paper from another class without permission is cheating under the UNT code of student conduct. Our learning goals are directly related to developing research skills, critical thinking skills and becoming content creators. Please note the detailed guidelines for generative AI usage. Failure to follow this policy will result in a deduction for the assignment.

AI Guidelines:

In this course, students are permitted to use AI-based tools (such as ChatGPT; Microsoft Copilot) on some assignments. AI may be used for pre-task activities such as brainstorming, outlining, and initial research. This level focuses on the effective use of AI for planning, synthesis, and ideation, but assessments should emphasize the ability to develop and refine these ideas independently. **You may use AI for planning, idea development, and research. Your final submission should show how you have developed and refined these ideas.**

AI-Assisted Assignments must include disclosure statements that cover:

- AI Tool Used: Name of AI product used
- Purpose of the Use: Briefly describe why the tool was used (e.g., assist in research, assist in editing)
- Output Produced: Identify which sections or concepts were influenced by AI.
- Modifications Made: Explain any alterations made to the AI-generated output and how it was adapted for your work.

In addition to your disclosure statements, you will also be required to provide the prompt you designed AND the AI output in addition to your edited assignment. Failure to include a disclosure statement, prompt, and AI output will be considered academic misconduct.

Grammarly Exception: Because Grammarly provides recommendations as you write, you will not have to turn in the AI prompt and output. If you are using Grammarly as you write, simply complete the self-disclosure and describe what aspects of Grammarly you are using (e.g., editing suggestions).

Please note that AI results can be biased and inaccurate. It is your responsibility to ensure that the information you use from AI is accurate. Additionally, pay attention to the privacy of your data. Many AI tools will incorporate and use any content you share, so be

careful not to unintentionally share copyrighted materials, original work, or personal information.

Learning how to thoughtfully and strategically use AI-based tools may help you develop your skills, refine your work, and prepare you for your future career. If you have any questions about citation or about what constitutes academic integrity in this course, please feel free to contact me to discuss your concerns.

(Language from University of Washington's AI Sample Syllabus Statements was used in the above statement. More information can be found at <https://teaching.washington.edu/coursedesign/ai/sample-ai-syllabus-statements/>)

Turnaround Time

I aim to return graded work to you within one week of the due date. When this is not possible, I will send an announcement to the class.

Grade Disputes

You are required to wait 24 hours before contacting me to dispute a grade. Within that time, I expect that you will review the assignment details and reflect on the quality of the work you turned in. If you would still like to meet, email me to set up a meeting (I cannot discuss grades over email). You should come to our scheduled meeting with specific examples that demonstrate that you earned a higher grade than you received. If you miss your scheduled meeting, you forfeit your right to a grade dispute. If you do not contact me to schedule a meeting within seven days of receiving your grade, you also forfeit your right to a grade dispute.

Extra Credit

We will try to offer at least two extra credit. Each opportunity is worth 10 points. You may complete up to 2 options for a total of 20 points total on the 1,000 point scale. Notifications of extra credit opportunities will be provided via Canvas Announcements.

COMM Library Copier Use Policy

Students conducting research in the Communication Studies Library associated with departmental coursework have access to a printer/photocopier located in the office adjacent to the library. We encourage students to make use of this resource to print research accessed online in the library or to copy essays from any of the department's holdings. Students may not use this resource for other purposes, such as printing courses assignments, class notes, scripts, etc. Students who use the copier for uses other than those outlined above will lose copying privileges.

Policy on Incompletes

An "Incomplete" will be awarded only in cases where 75% of the coursework has been completed AND the grade is warranted by an excuse (e.g., medical, military). Inability to complete coursework in a timely fashion does not constitute an acceptable reason for requesting or receiving an incomplete. To request an incomplete please set up a meeting with the Course Director AND your Instructor prior to the Final Exam period.

SPOT EVALUATIONS

The Student Perceptions of Teaching (SPOT) is a requirement for all organized classes at UNT. This short survey will be made available to you at the end of the semester, providing you a chance to comment on how this class is taught. Student feedback is important in order that the classroom environment can continue to evolve to meet the needs of students at UNT. Thus, SPOT is an important part of your participation in this class. Students may access the online SPOT via the email link sent to your my.unt email address.

Crisis Contingency

In the event of the university closing for weather-related reasons or illness outbreak, e.g. flu, please visit the course website on Canvas. I will provide instructions on how to turn in assignments and how the class will proceed utilizing the Canvas announcement function.

Disclaimer

This syllabus should not be construed as a binding contract between the instructor and the students. The professor reserves the right to change any aspect of the course without notice.

Assignments:

Exams (35% of final grade):

This course includes three exams. Each exam will be comprised of multiple choice, true false and essay questions. You will have 1 hour 20 min. to complete the exam. You may use one 8 ½ X 11 piece of paper of handwritten notes that will be submitted with your exam. The exam will be completed in class! A specific review sheet for each exam is posted on Canvas. This course does NOT have a comprehensive final exam—instead you will be completing a major writing assignment. Exam #1 and #2 are worth 125 points; Exam #3 is worth 100 points.

Annotated Bibliography (150 points worth 15% of final grade):

You will complete an annotated bibliography on the theory you have selected to use in your communication analysis paper (see below). Gather 6 journal articles or book chapters on the theory. Attempt to find seminal works. All articles should be from academic journals, book chapters or seminal texts. You should provide seminal or key texts in your review—however, I would like for you to find academic articles that apply or review how these concepts fit into Communication Studies. For each journal article/book chapter provide the APA citation and summarize the article in an extended paragraph (200-300 words: can be single-spaced). Please turn into Turnitin.com on Canvas. **AI is allowed for idea generation and editing for this assignment.**

Journal/Participation (200 points for 20% of grade)

This course consists of lectures, class discussions, group and individual activities, special presentations and reflective writing. The lectures are designed to promote dialogue on issues addressed in text chapters and to provide additional information beyond what is included in the text. Class discussions are designed to encourage students to express

opinions, observations, share experiences, and ask questions. Group activities are designed to provide opportunities for students to learn from each other. You will often be asked to engage in reflective writing in preparation for class discussion. You may submit your journals handwritten in class or in a word document via Canvas at midterm and finals. Please feel free to bring a laptop or iPad to type your response in class. You will be asked to complete summaries of discussion, speakers, activities, or self-reflexive writing for your Journal. A blue or green book will be provided if you wish to submit a handwritten journal. **AI is not allowed for your journals.**

Communication Analysis Paper (300 points worth 30% of final grade):
AI is allowed for idea generation, outlining, and editing for this assignment.

Topic Paragraph:

Provide a topic paragraph explain the theory and artifact you are planning to examine in your final paper. You must get your theory and artifact approved to continue with this assignment. This is a graded assignment (worth 30 points).

Outline:

Fully developed outline or rough draft of final paper is due during individuals meetings held the last two weeks of class. In addition to the outline you should have a complete reference list in APA format completed. This is a graded assignment (worth 70 points).

Final Paper:

Write an 8-10 page (of text --this page requirement does not include cover page or references) typed double spaced paper that applies a specific theory to a communication event/ artifact (worth 200 points). Each paper should include:

- Introduction- state purpose of paper and preview structure of paper
- Literature Review- discuss purpose of theory selected and break down theory into key functions/components
- Describe Communication Event/Artifact- be sure to describe event/artifact. If possible include copy of event/artifact in an appendix. Inclusion of event/artifact in appendix does NOT mean that you can skip over your description.
- Rationale - explain why this theory is appropriate to apply to communication event/ artifact selected.
- Analysis (Apply Theory to Artifact)- explore artifact using the functions or components of the theory you outlined in literature review.
- Discussion- What does your application tell us about the communication event/ artifact? What does your application tell us about the theory?
- Conclusion- review your main points and draw summaries based on your application
- References- Academic books and journal articles in APA style. Avoid textbooks. Seminal works for selected theories are required. **8 peer-reviewed academic sources from Communication Studies Journals are required**

Overall Grading Summary:

Assignment	Point Value	Your Score
Exams (35% of grade):		
Exam #1	125	
Exam #2	125	
Exam #3	100	
Communication Analysis Paper (30% of grade):		
Topic Paragraph	30	
Outline with References	70	
Final Paper	200	
Annotated Bibliography (15% of grade)	150	
Journal (20% of grade)		
Mid-term Journal	100	
Final Journal	100	
Total	1000	

Final Grade Calculation:

900-1000	A
800-899	B
700-799	C
600-699	D
599 and below	F

Fall 2025 Tentative Course Schedule:

	Material	Readings	Assignments
8/19	No Class- Please review syllabus on Canvas		
Module 1: 8/21	Introduction to the Course & Communication Theory		
8/26 & 8/28	Foundations of Comm Theory	Ch. 1	
Module 2: 9/2, 9/4 & 9/9	Frameworks	Ch. 2	
Module 3: 9/11 & 9/16	The Communicator	Ch. 3	
Module 4: 9/18 & 9/23	The Message Discuss Communication Analysis Paper Assignment	Ch. 4	Topic Paragraph/Artifact Due 9/18
EXAM #1 (M1-M4) Exam on 9/25 in Class			
Module 5: 9/30 & 10/2	The Medium	Ch. 5	
10/7 & 10/9	Project Workweek		Midterm Journal (M1-5) Due 10/9
Module 6: 10/14 & 10/16	& Beyond	Ch. 6	Annotated Bibliography Due 10/16
Module 7: 10/21 & 10/23	The Relationship	Ch. 7	
Module 8: 10/28 & 10/30	The Group	Ch. 8	
EXAM #2 (M5-M8) Exam on 11/4 in class			
Module 9: 11/6 & 11/11	The Organization	Ch. 9	Outline with References due 11/11
Module 11: 11/13 & 11/18	Culture	Ch. 11	
Module 12: 11/18 & 11/20	Society	Ch. 12	Final Journal Due 11/20
EXAM #3 (M9-M12) Exam on Canvas due 12/1			
11/25 & 11/27	No Class- Happy Thanksgiving!		

12/2 & 12/4 (Meeting ava.prior to Thanksgiving Break!)	Individual Meetings—NO CLASS SCHEDULED —You are required to attend an individual meeting regarding your final paper. A sign-up list will be provided.		
12/9 at 11:59pm	Communication Analysis Paper Due Paper due 12/9 on Canvas (Late Turn in with the automatic 48 hour extension you will be 11:59pm on 12/11).		NO LATE ASSIGNMENTS WILL BE ACCEPTED AFTER THE AUTOMATIC EXTENSION

UNT Policies:

Academic Integrity Standards and Consequences

According to UNT Policy 06.003, [Student Academic Integrity](#), academic dishonesty occurs when students engage in behaviors including, but not limited to: cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, forgery, plagiarism, and sabotage. A finding of academic dishonesty may result in a range of academic penalties or sanctions ranging from admonition to expulsion from the University.

Acceptable Student Behavior

Student behavior that interferes with an instructor's ability to conduct a class or other students' opportunity to learn is unacceptable and disruptive and will not be tolerated in any instructional forum at UNT. Students engaging in unacceptable behavior will be directed to leave the classroom and the instructor may refer the student to the Dean of Students to consider whether the student's conduct violated the [Code of Student Conduct](#). The University's expectations for student conduct apply to all instructional forums, including University and electronic classroom, labs, discussion groups, field trips, etc. The [Dean of Students Office](#) enforces the [Code of Student Conduct](#). The Code explains what conduct is prohibited, the process the DOS uses to review reports of alleged misconduct by students, and the sanctions that can be assigned. When students may have violated the Code they meet with a representative from the Dean of Students Office to discuss the alleged misconduct in an educational process.

Code of Student Conduct

All persons shall adhere to the Code of Student Conduct regarding academic dishonesty, including acts of cheating and plagiarism. See 18.1.16 Student Standards of Academic Integrity.

“Cheating. The use of unauthorized assistance in an academic exercise, including but not limited to:

1. use of any unauthorized assistance to take exams, tests, quizzes or other assessments;

2. dependence upon the aid of sources beyond those authorized by the instructor in writing papers, preparing reports, solving problems or carrying out other assignments;
3. acquisition, without permission, of tests, notes or other academic materials belonging to a faculty or staff member of the University;
4. due submission of a paper or project, or re-submission of a paper or project to a different class without express permission from the instructor;
5. any other act designed to give a student an unfair advantage on an academic assignment.

Plagiarism. Use of another's thoughts or words without proper attribution in any academic exercise, regardless of the student's intent, including but not limited to:

1. the knowing or negligent use by paraphrase or direct quotation of the published or unpublished work of another person without full and clear acknowledgement or citation.
2. The knowing or negligent unacknowledged use of materials prepared by another person or by an agency engaged in selling term papers or other academic materials.” (Policies of the University of North Texas, 2012, Section 18.1.16, pg. 3-4).

Rules for citing quotes and ideas can be found in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 7th edition. **Please note:** *Intentionality is not an issue with regard to plagiarism. Even if a student plagiarizes without intending to do so, it is still considered plagiarism and will result in the appropriate consequences.* Students are urged to review the parameters and provisions of plagiarism to avoid any potential plagiarism issues.

Punishments for cheating or plagiarism range from a grade of ZERO points on the assignment in question to failure of the course. You can find additional information on the University policy regarding plagiarism and academic dishonesty at http://policy.unt.edu/sites/default/files/untpolicy/pdf/7-Student_Affairs-Academic_Integrity.pdf

ADA Accommodation

UNT makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Accommodation (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide a student with an accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding one's specific course needs. This is now conducted electronically via the AIM system. Students may request accommodations at any time; however, ODA notices of accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. For additional information see the [ODA website](#). You may also contact them by phone at 940.565.4323.

Important Notice for F-1 Students Taking Distance Education Courses Federal Regulation

To read detailed Immigration and Customs Enforcement regulations for F-1 students taking online courses, please visit the [Electronic Code of Federal Regulations](#) website. The specific portion concerning distance education courses is located at Title 8 CFR 214.2 Paragraph (f)(6)(i)(G).

The paragraph reads:

(G) For F-1 students enrolled in classes for credit or classroom hours, no more than the equivalent of one class or three credits per session, term, semester, trimester, or quarter may be counted toward the full course of study requirement if the class is taken on-line or through distance education and does not require the student's physical attendance for classes, examination or other purposes integral to completion of the class. An on-line or distance education course is a course that is offered principally through the use of television, audio, or computer transmission including open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, or satellite, audio conferencing, or computer conferencing. If the F-1 student's course of study is in a language study program, no on-line or distance education classes may be considered to count toward a student's full course of study requirement.

University of North Texas Compliance

To comply with immigration regulations, an F-1 visa holder within the United States may need to engage in an on-campus experiential component for this course. This component (which must be approved in advance by the instructor) can include activities such as taking an on-campus exam, participating in an on-campus lecture or lab activity, or other on-campus experience integral to the completion of this course.

If such an on-campus activity is required, it is the student's responsibility to do the following:

- (1) Submit a written request to the instructor for an on-campus experiential component within one week of the start of the course.
- (2) Ensure that the activity on campus takes place and the instructor documents it in writing with a notice sent to the International Student and Scholar Services Office. ISSS has a form available that you may use for this purpose.

Because the decision may have serious immigration consequences, if an F-1 student is unsure about his or her need to participate in an on-campus experiential component for this course, s/he should contact the [UNT International Student and Scholar Services Office](#) by telephone 940-565-2195 or email internationaladvising@unt.edu to get clarification before the one-week deadline.

1/15/04

Rev. 7/22/2016

Firearms Policy

The University of North Texas is committed to providing a safe environment for students, faculty, staff, and visitors, and to respecting the right of individuals who are licensed to carry a handgun where permitted by law. Individuals who are licensed to carry may do so on campus premises except in locations and at Activities prohibited by law or by this policy. Open carry is

NOT permitted. See 04.001 Carrying of Concealed Handguns on Campus policy for more details.

Sexual Assault Prevention

UNT is committed to providing a safe learning environment free of all forms of sexual misconduct. Federal laws and UNT policies prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex as well as sexual misconduct. If you or someone you know is experiencing sexual harassment, relationship violence, stalking and/or sexual assault, there are campus resources available to provide support and assistance. The Survivor Advocates can be reached at SurvivorAdvocate@unt.edu or by calling the Dean of Students Office at 940-565-2648.

Emergency Notification & Procedures

UNT uses a system called [Eagle Alert](#) to quickly notify students with critical information in the event of an emergency (i.e., severe weather, campus closing, and health and public safety emergencies like chemical spills, fires, or violence). In the event of a university closure, please refer to Canvas for contingency plans for covering course materials.