WHO NEEDS TO TELL STORIES WITH DATA?

Data storytelling is more than sharing data—at its most simple, it’s about designing charts and tables that make sense to the people who will be using them and help those people make better, faster decisions.

While making a chart is as easy as a few clicks, doing it well requires much more. There is a science to how our eyes and minds process information as well as an art to making good graphic design choices. This comes together in an effective data presentation when the work is readable, usable, and above all actionable—not just aesthetically pleasing (though we’ll certainly address that too).

As information professionals, we are well-positioned to understand and design for the needs of our users, to interrogate our data sources thoughtfully, and to ask future-thinking questions. This course will also draw on elements from data journalism, cognitive psychology, user experience, graphic design, business, and more. This multidisciplinary approach will take us on a grand tour that will touch on many aspects of data analysis and will serve as an excellent introduction to other data-oriented courses in the iSchool master’s program.

Why should you take this course? Whether you’re interested in a career in libraries, archives, UX, information architecture, information security, or another field, you will need to analyze data and tell stories with data. You might have ticketing data to share, usage logs to query, or collection management decisions to make. Throughout your career, you will make recommendations to your colleagues and management using data, and you will want to present a compelling case. Whether or not this is the only data-centric class you take in your time at the iSchool, I hope you will gain skills that will serve you well in the rest of your professional career.

There are no prerequisites for this course other than curiosity, the ability to work independently, and the desire to build your professional toolkit. No programming experience is required. If you are a relative novice with data analysis and visualization, that’s perfect! If you’re experienced with data viz best practices but eager to build your expertise in communicating better, that works too, but I encourage you to suggest modifications for assignments so they can be appropriately challenging for your skill level. Allons-y!
COURSE MATERIALS

Hardware and software
We're meeting in the computer lab, so you'll have access to the desktop machines and the software required for the course even if you do not have a laptop. Please note that the computer lab permits no food or drinks other than water in spill-proof containers.

If you would prefer to bring your own laptop, the software packages we will use are freely (or cheaply) available for students. Tableau Desktop and Tableau Prep activation keys will be provided to you. Student licenses for Microsoft Office are available through UT. Please note that all software may not work well in Macs or may vary slightly, so you may still need the desktop machines.

Optional book to purchase
This is a basic graphic design book that explains important design concepts really well. While no specific readings will be assigned from it, it will be a useful resource when revising your work or when providing feedback to your peers. Used copies are fine.


Books provided for you
Our main textbook for the course is Storytelling with Data by Cole Nussbaumer Knaflic. We'll also be reading works from other experts in the field of data visualization, from classics like Edward Tufte to contemporary experts in academia and industry.


COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

Brief descriptions of course assignments appear below. More details will be provided in class and on Canvas.

**Discussion questions** (10% of final grade): Prior to each class, post 3 thought-provoking questions on Canvas about the upcoming class's readings. These questions should be designed to encourage discussion (that is, they are not yes/no questions), and they give me a sense of what you are most interested in. These are due at 10 PM the day before class. A thread for each class's questions is available on Canvas.

**Data diary** (10% of final grade): This assignment addresses two important elements: that data surrounds us, and storytelling with data is as much of an art as it is a science. Before we dive into best practices, let's address the fun, creativity, beauty, and silliness that's instrumental to the field. Research and gather data about yourself on a topic of your choice and keep a data diary for a week. Examples include the music you listen to, your phone app use, how much time you spend on coursework, how much media you consume and what kinds, etc. Build a data presentation to showcase what you've collected. Do not use Excel or Tableau for your deliverable.

**Excel and Tableau assignments** (30% of final grade): A series of short analytical assignments designed to complement and reinforce the
tutorials and hands-on work done in class. Specifics will be available on Canvas for each assignment.

**Visualization blog post** (5% of final grade): Examining the works of others is a great way to develop your eye and build your own skillset. Write a post on Canvas about a data presentation you have found (350ish words). Address what data are being shown (and if the source is cited), who you think the audience is, the goals of the data presentation, and why/why not the data presentation is effective.

**The Moth story exercise** (5% of final grade): Analyzing examples of storytelling can help us learn how to recognize narrative elements and opportunities to integrate narrative in our own work. In this short assignment, you'll analyze several short recordings of live storytelling from The Moth, a podcast and series of live storytelling events hosted around the country.

**Summary of final data project** (5% of final grade): Post a summary of your data project on Canvas (~300 words) that addresses what the data say and why you want to tell this story.

**Short speech** (5% of final grade): Give a short verbal presentation (3-5 minutes) to the class on a topic of your choice. While we're often expected to present in school or at work, it's relatively rare to spend time on developing presentation skills. The point of this assignment is to provide a low-stakes opportunity to develop a good talk so these skills can be applied elsewhere, including later in the semester and in your future careers.

**Makeover Monday dashboard** (5% of final grade): Makeover Monday is a weekly online event where a data presentation and the dataset behind it are released, and you’re challenged to make it better! During this timed in-class activity, you will create a Tableau dashboard based on a dataset you’ve never seen before and publish your dashboard to Tableau Public.

**Final project deliverables and presentation** (25% of final grade): This culminating project is a hands-on experience to design, prototype, and develop a complex example of a data visualization dashboard with storytelling elements that will be an asset to your professional portfolio. Your project must have a clear and specific audience. The final project includes the data presentation, associated documentation, and a presentation to the class. Your formal written feedback on a peer’s draft will also be included in your grade.
GRADING

Here’s how to do well on course assignments:

- Read the assignment instructions in detail. Make note of anything that sounds particularly challenging.
- If you have questions, first start by consulting your study buddy. For software-related questions, Googling often yields helpful results. If you exhaust both of these options, reach out to me.
- Before you hand in your work, read the instructions again to make sure you completed everything.

Here are the primary things I will look for when I grade:

- Did you put the best practices from class and from our readings to use?
- Did you complete all components of the exercise per my instructions?

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<tr>
<th>ASSIGNMENT POLICIES</th>
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<tr>
<td>Unless otherwise specified, turn in assignments through Canvas.</td>
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<td>There will be no group projects. You’ll do plenty of these at the iSchool, and I want everyone to have a chance to develop all of the skills in the course.</td>
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<td>While these assignments will represent your individual effort, I encourage you to see the advice and feedback of your peers.</td>
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<td>I am available in class and for appointments to offer feedback but will not provide feedback on draft items sent by email.</td>
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<td>Previously submitted assignments cannot be resubmitted with edits and corrections for a higher grade.</td>
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<td>Late assignments will be docked a point for each day delayed</td>
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<th>OTHER COURSE POLICIES</th>
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<td>Be excellent to each other: Treat others as you would like to be treated. Give presenters and your classmates your full attention. Be courteous and thoughtful with your feedback. Limit computer/phone use to course-related activities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Help one another: I highly recommend you select a study buddy in the course. In addition to sharing notes if either of you miss a class, having a peer with whom you can discuss ideas and go to for help is invaluable.</td>
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<td>Steal like an artist but cite your sources: To be clear, this is not an endorsement of plagiarism but instead acknowledgement that that it is a rare thing for a work to be truly original—we’re often inspired by the creations of others. If your work draws from someone else’s work in any way, cite it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communicate with me: Email is the most reliable way to reach me. Please include the course number (INF385T) in the subject line. Allow a 24-hour window for responses.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I’m here to help you: Take advantage of it by requesting office hours to talk through any aspect of the course you don’t understand. Tableau is deceptively complicated, and you shouldn’t feel embarrassed if you don’t understand something immediately.</td>
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Adopt an attitude that feedback is always welcome: Give thoughtful constructive criticism to your peers, and be prepared to receive it too. This goes for me as well. A short email to say, “I really liked that activity” or “I didn’t get that lecture at all—it needed more examples” is very helpful for me. I’ll request feedback from you on the course mid-way through the semester, but please don’t wait if something crosses your mind.

Attendance: While I will not take attendance, please be aware that a substantial portion of course content includes hands-on labs and activities. As a result, missing classes and not participating in activities can impact your performance and result in a lower grade. It's your responsibility to look on Canvas and/or check in with your classmates for notes and assignments you missed.

Preferred names and pronouns: I will gladly address you by your preferred name and pronouns. Please let me know early in the semester so I can make changes to my records, and please correct me gently if I make a mistake.

UNIVERSITY POLICIES

Religious holy days: A student who misses classes or other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day should inform the instructor as far in advance of the absence as possible, so that arrangements can be made to complete an assignment within a reasonable time after the absence.

Students with disabilities: Please notify your instructor of any modification/adaptation you may require to accommodate a disability-related need. You may find out more information on the Services for Students with Disabilities website: http://diversity.utexas.edu/disability/ and/or http://diversity.utexas.edu/disability/how-to-register-with-ssd/

Policy on scholastic dishonesty: Students who violate University rules on scholastic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary penalties, including the possibility of failure in the course and/or dismissal from the University. Since such dishonesty harms the individual, all students and the integrity of the University, policies on scholastic dishonesty will be strictly enforced. For further information, please visit the Office of Student Conduct and Academic Integrity website at http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/conduct/.

Use of e-mail for official correspondence to students: All students should be familiar with the University's official e-mail student notification policy. It is the student's responsibility to keep the University informed as to changes in his or her e-mail address. Students are expected to check e-mail on a frequent and regular basis in order to stay current with University-related communications, recognizing that certain communications may be time-critical. The complete text of this policy and instructions for updating your e-mail address are available at http://www.utexas.edu/its/policies/emailnotify.html.

University of Texas honor code: “As A Student Of The University Of Texas At Austin, I Shall Abide By The Core Values Of The University And Uphold Academic Integrity.”
CREDIT

This course and all its trappings owe a substantial debt to Dr. Diane Bailey. Dr. Bailey formulated Presenting Information, this course’s predecessor.
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<tr>
<th>Week#</th>
<th>Date</th>
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| 4     | 2/13 | Audience and context | Who are we designing for, and how can we use that information to make our work better? | Application to the Development of Graphical Methods. *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 79(387), 531-554. doi:10.2307/2288400  
Tableau tutorial: dashboards, layout, actions, filtering, and maps | Tableau exercise #1 |
Tableau tutorial: calculated fields | Data diary |
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<td>Skim UT Austin branding guidelines: <a href="https://utexas.app.box.com/v/brandcampaign/file/218170563404">https://utexas.app.box.com/v/brandcampaign/file/218170563404</a></td>
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<td>9 3/19</td>
<td>No class—Spring Break</td>
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<td>11 4/2</td>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>How can I best give and receive feedback?</td>
<td>Retrieved from <a href="https://search.lib.utexas.edu/permalink/01UTAU_INS">https://search.lib.utexas.edu/permalink/01UTAU_INS</a> T/171befj/alma991057965958806011</td>
<td></td>
<td>Short presentation due</td>
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</table>
| 12 4/9    | Working with clients | How can we establish ourselves as good collaborators and guide a project toward success? | Sarikaya, S. et al. (2018). What do we talk about when we talk about dashboards? *IEEE transactions on visualization and computer graphics* 25:1. doi: 10.1109/TVCG.2018.2864903  
Skim Gartner Magic Quadrant for Analysis and Business Intelligence Platforms: https://www.gartner.com/doc/reprints?id=1-68720FP&ct=190213&st=sb | Tableau tutorial: advanced dashboard actions | Draft project due               |
regular expressions, level of detail calculations, and set actions | Review assigned peers’ drafts and provide feedback |
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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL READING

This class of course only scratches the surface of data and data storytelling. In addition to seeking out additional iSchool courses to build your data skills, consider the following resources. This list is not exhaustive.

TABLEAU BLOGS AND RESOURCES

makeovermonday.co.uk
workout-wednesday.com
ryansleeper.com
vizwiz.com
dataplusscience.com
datarevelations.com

BLOGS AND OTHER WEBSITES

storytellingwithdata.com
economist.com/graphic-detail
junkcharts.typepad.com
pudding.cool
storytellingwithdata.com
visualizingdata.com

flowingdata.com
Informationisbeautiful.net
makeovermonday.co.uk
reddit.com/r/DataIsUgly
theatlas.com
viz.WTF

BOOKS

Practical


Beautiful


Ethics and numeric literacy


**PODCASTS**
datastori.es
storytellingwithdata.com/podcast
99% Invisible
PolicyViz

**ORGANIZATIONS**
Data Visualization Society
Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE)
Association for Computing Machinery (ACM)

**CONFERENCES**
Tableau Conference
IEEE VIs
Malofiej
Tapestry Conference (currently on hiatus)

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