

# Fact-finding Investigations on Human Rights

We meet in-person Mon. and Wed. 1:00 - 2:15 pm

Classroom: Humphrey School, Room 35

1.5 credits / half-semester course

[Canvas course link](#)



## Course Description

This course will familiarize you with core principles and techniques for human rights fact-finding, focusing especially on **interviews**.

You'll learn practical skills, such as: planning and preparing for fact-finding interviews; navigating ethical and security challenges; tailoring interviews for specific populations; conducting remote interviews; minimizing the risk of retraumatization and vicarious trauma; and adapting fact-finding approaches for restricted or challenging locations.

This seminar uses role-play simulations as a learning tool. Most weeks, you will "learn by doing" as we spend one class session discussing topics and techniques, and the other doing role play exercises in pairs. After many short practice sessions in class, you'll do a full, in-depth mock interview with me based on a hypothetical scenario.

## Instructor Information

Janet Walsh - Senior Fellow and Director of the Humphrey International Fellows Program

Email: [walsh912@umn.edu](mailto:walsh912@umn.edu)

Phone: (612) 695-1296 (mobile)

Office: Humphrey School, room 153

Personal Zoom meeting room [link](#)

Pronouns: She/her/hers

Office Hours: Tuesdays 1:00 - 2:00 or by appointment. I also welcome spontaneous chats any time.

**About me:** I'm a Senior Fellow in the Humphrey School and Director of the Humphrey International Fellowship Program. I teach courses, advise students and fellows, and foster connections between the Humphrey School community and human rights experts. I'm also a lawyer who has advocated for gender equality and women's human rights through work with nonprofits, the United Nations, and law firms. Prior to joining the U of M in 2019, I worked for Human Rights Watch for 17 years, as deputy director of the Women's Rights Division. There, I trained many staff on fact-finding and other activities.

## Learning Objectives

Through this course, you will understand what fact-finding is and how fact-finding interviews are used in the human rights field. You will develop skills that will enable you to:

- Understand core standards and ethical considerations for human rights interviews
- Mitigate risks of retraumatization and vicarious trauma
- Interview survivors of human rights abuses, and understand best practices for interviewing specific populations
- Navigate remote interviews
- Assess and handle security risks for interviews
- Obtain data and information from official sources

## Assignments and Grading

The assignments are short and practical. They're designed to build skills for planning and conducting human rights interviews. There is no lengthy written paper assignment, and no final exam. **Detailed instructions for written assignments and skills exercises** are in a [separate guidance document](#) (also posted on Canvas). That document includes a link to a set of [examples](#) from past students, which you might find helpful as you plan your own assignments.

Students have the option for the final grade to be on the A-F grade scale or S/N (Satisfactory or Not Satisfactory). For additional grading information, please refer to:

<https://policy.umn.edu/education/gradingtranscripts>.

### Grading overview

- Class participation 70%
- Written assignments (10 points each) 15%
- Mock interview with instructor (20 points) 15%

Elements of class participation include engaging in simulated interviews during class sessions and participating in class discussions. All class discussions must be respectful of diverse opinions. Please also be appropriate as you take on characters for your role-play simulations.

## Weekly Schedule

Week 1: Introductions; Core standards and ethical considerations	
Jan. 18	<p><i>Read:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Manual on Human Rights Monitoring ("OHCHR Manual"), <a href="#">chapter 3</a>, "Human Rights Monitoring, Fact-Finding and Investigations by the United Nations" (read pages 3 - 17)</li><li>• Human Rights Watch Interview Manual, 2019 ("HRW Manual") (read pages 1 - 3; pages 20 - 53 on preparing for interviews and informed content; and 86 - 93 on note-taking / recording)</li><li>• The Advocates for Human Rights, <a href="#">chapter 3</a>, "Monitoring," in "Human Rights Tools for a Changing World: A Step-by-step Guide to Human Rights Fact-finding, Documentation, and Advocacy," 2015 ("The Advocates for Human Rights Guide") (<i>skim</i> pages 15 - 33)</li></ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>UMN Institutional Review Board website, "<a href="#">Toolkit Library</a>," 2021 (skim the topics list on this website)</li> </ul> <p><i>In-class Activity:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ice-breaker interviews</li> </ul>
<b>Week 2: Preparing for interviews; Mitigating retraumatization and vicarious trauma; Informed consent</b>	
Jan. 23	<p><i>Read:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>HRW Manual (read pages 59 - 85 on understanding trauma and minimizing retraumatization; and pages 234 - 239 on stress and resilience)</li> <li>OHCHR Manual, <a href="#">chapter 12</a> (read sections D - F, pages 9 - 35)</li> <li>Human Rights Resilience Project website, browse the "<a href="#">Tools and Programs for Resilience</a>"</li> <li>Human Rights Resilience Project website, browse the "<a href="#">Resources for Antiracism &amp; Black Lives Matter Advocates</a>"</li> <li>OHCHR Manual, <a href="#">chapter 2</a>, "Basic Principles of Human Rights Monitoring" (read pages 3 to 10)</li> <li>HRW <a href="#">report</a>, "'Work Faster or Get Out': Labor Rights Abuses in Cambodia's Garment Industry" 2015 (read pages 1 - 31 – summary, recommendations and methodology)</li> </ul> <p><i>Assignment:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Informed consent outline (due Jan. 24)</li> </ul>
Jan. 25	<p><i>In-Class Activity:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Practice informed consent</li> </ul>
<b>Week 3: Demographic information; composition of interview teams</b>	
Jan. 30	<p><i>Read:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>OHCHR Manual, <a href="#">chapter 11</a>, "Interviewing" (read the whole chapter)</li> <li>OHCHR, "<a href="#">Integrating a Gender Perspective into Human Rights Investigations: Guidance and Practice</a>," 2018 (<i>skim</i> pages 14 - 35)</li> <li>HRW report, "<a href="#">How Can We Work Without Wages?: Salary Abuses Facing Migrant Workers Ahead of Qatar's FIFA World Cup 2022</a>," 2020 (read summary and methodology sections, pages 1 - 8)</li> <li><b>Optional reading:</b> UK Foreign &amp; Commonwealth Office, "<a href="#">International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict</a>," 2017 (<i>skim</i> pages 161 - 186 and Annex 7)</li> </ul> <p><i>Assignment:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Outline demographic questions (Due Jan. 31)</li> </ul>
Feb. 1	<p><i>In-class activity:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Practice asking for demographic information</li> </ul>
<b>Week 4: Managing interviews; considerations for specific populations; ending interviews &amp; offering referrals</b>	
Feb. 6	<p><i>Read:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"<a href="#">Murad code</a>" (Global Code of Conduct for Gathering and Using Information about Systemic and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence), 2022 (<i>skim</i> the whole document)</li> <li>HRW Manual, sections on interviews with members of marginalized and vulnerable populations (read pages 134 - 179); section on referral sheets (read pages 24 - 26) and on ending interviews (page 84)</li> <li><a href="#">Tip Sheet</a> on mandatory reporting (1 page)</li> <li>HRW press release, "<a href="#">Egypt: Government Undermining Environmental Groups</a>," 2022 (skim the whole press release)</li> </ul>

	<p><i>Assignment:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Draft part of a referral sheet (Due Feb. 7)</li> <li>● First draft of <b>questionnaire</b> for mock interview with “Jan” (Due Feb. 10)</li> </ul>
Feb. 8	<p><i>In-class activity:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Practice ending an interview / offering referrals</li> </ul>
<p><b>Week 5: Security planning and accessing restricted locations</b></p>	
Feb. 13	<p><i>Read:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● OHCHR Manual, <a href="#">chapter 14</a>, “Protection of Victims, Witnesses and Other Cooperating Persons” (read pages 4 - 42)</li> <li>● HRW Manual (read Part II: Security, pages 5 - 19; pages 112 - 133 on institutional settings and humanitarian crises and armed conflict)</li> <li>● Association for the Prevention of Torture and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) <a href="#">manual</a>, “Monitoring Immigration Detention: Practical Manual,” 2014 (<b>skim</b> sections on interviewing, pages 62 - 72)</li> </ul> <p><i>Assignment</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Second draft</b> of questionnaire for mock interview with “Jan” (Due Feb. 17)</li> </ul>
Feb. 15	<p><i>In-class activity:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● In pairs, discuss security risks for your fictional fact-finding research.</li> </ul> <p>Open time for questions / discussion of your questionnaires and preparing for the mock interview with “Jan”</p>
<p><b>Week 6: Remote Interviews; Multimedia Interviews</b></p>	
Feb. 20	<p><i>Read:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● HRW Manual (read pages 102 - 112 on remote interviewing)</li> <li>● Public Interest Advocacy Centre, “<a href="#">Restricted Access Interviews: A Guide to Interviewing Witnesses in Remote Human Rights Investigations</a>,” 2021 (<b>skim</b> sections 4 and 5: Setting Up the Interview and Conducting the Interview, pages 50 - 74)</li> <li>● HRW Manual (read pages 94 - 102 on multimedia interviewing)</li> <li>● WITNESS Video for Change <a href="#">guide</a>, “Conducting Safe, Effective and Ethical Interviews with Survivors of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence” (download the guide from the link, and <b>skim</b> pages 3 - 13)</li> </ul>
Feb. 22	<p>Guest speaker – To be confirmed</p> <p><i>Watch</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● WITNESS <a href="#">video</a>, “How to film trustworthy video evidence of police abuse,” 2020 (17 min.)</li> <li>● <i>Optional film:</i> “Bring Her Home,” 2022 (password is prez1 a1)</li> </ul> <p><i>Assignment:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● (Some students) In-depth mock interview with “Jan” (Due March 3)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Week 7: Obtaining Data and Information; Ensuring Accuracy; Avoiding Defamation</b></p>	
Feb. 27	<p><i>Read:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● OHCHR Manual, <a href="#">chapter 7</a>, “Gathering Contextual Information” (read pages 3 - 22)</li> <li>● Center for Constitutional Rights <a href="#">report</a>, “FOIA Basics for Activists,” 2019 (<b>skim</b> pages 1 - 11)</li> <li>● MN Counties Governmental Trust Resources <a href="#">guide</a>, “An Introduction to the Minnesota Government Data Practices Act,” 2015 (<b>skim</b> pages 1 - 4)</li> <li>● Protect the Protest <a href="#">guide</a>, “An Activist’s Guide: Reducing Exposure to SLAPP Lawsuits,” 2019 (<b>skim</b> the full guide)</li> </ul> <p>Student Rating of Teaching</p>

March 1	<p><i>Watch:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Washington Post <a href="#">video</a>, “Everything you need to know about FOIA” (6 min.)</li> <li>• ColumbiaLearn <a href="#">video</a>, “6.2.1 Defamation - Part I -The Basics” (23:14 min.)</li> </ul> <p><i>Assignment:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (Some students) In-depth mock interview with “Jan” (Due March 3)</li> <li>• Write a thank you email to “Jan” for the interview. (Due March 13)</li> </ul>
March 6 - 10: Spring Break	
Week 8: Debrief about Mock Interviews / Wrap-up	
March 13	<p><i>No readings for the final day of class</i></p> <p><i>In class:</i> Debrief about mock interviews; discuss how you see interviewing playing a role in your future work.</p>

## Course Materials

There is no textbook. Our main readings are an online UN human rights monitoring [manual](#), portions of a Human Rights Watch training manual on interviewing (used with HRW permission), and resources from other organizations. You will receive a PDF with the HRW manual readings, and links for the rest are on Canvas. Please do not share the HRW manual materials with anyone other than participants in this class. HRW is kindly letting us use this resource, but this internal manual is not a public document.

To keep your reading load manageable, I’m asking you to “**read**” some sources carefully, and briefly “**skim**” others.

Please always have a pen and paper handy, and use them to take notes during practice interviews.

## Wellbeing and Minimizing Vicarious Trauma

Some of the readings and exercises for this course address interviewing to document situations involving violence and discrimination. While none of the readings directly describe such abuses, the materials may be stressful to read or view. In class, I will suggest techniques to minimize the risk of vicarious trauma.

If you are struggling with the course because of the content, speak with me and/or seek help from the counseling center or other support services, including those explained under “Mental Health and Stress Management” at this [link](#).

You can also access free campus resources like:

- [Let’s Talk](#)
- [UMN BIPOC Mental Health Collective](#)
- [Mindful Mondays](#)
- [PAWS](#) (Pet Away Worry & Stress) sessions with dogs, bunnies, cats, chickens, and other therapy animals
- Free webinars and other programs from the [Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing](#)
- MN guide “[Wellbeing 101: Tips and Strategies to Help You Focus on Wellbeing This Semester](#)”
- [Aurora Center](#)
- [Student Conflict Resolution Center](#)

## Set Your Canvas Notification Preferences

Please set up your Canvas “notification preferences” to choose how and when you’d like to receive messages via text, email, or both. Find easy-to-follow [instructions](#) at “How do I set my Canvas notification preferences as a student?”

## University and School policies

For links to University of Minnesota and Humphrey School policies, please click the “U of M Policies” link on our course Canvas site, or see <https://z.umn.edu/PolicyStatements>. Policies include information on student conduct, scholastic dishonesty, sexual harassment, equal opportunity, disability accommodations, and more.

## Land Acknowledgment

The University of Minnesota Twin Cities is built within the traditional, ancestral, and contemporary lands of Indigenous peoples. It resides on Dakota land ceded in the Treaties of 1837 and 1851. It is important to acknowledge the peoples on whose land we live, learn, and work as we seek to improve and strengthen our relations with tribal nations. We must ensure that our institution provides support, resources, and programs that increase access to all aspects of higher education for American Indian students, staff, faculty, and community members.