ECON 2510 • Section A • Fall 2026

Using Data for Economic Policy

Course Syllabus

Instructor

Name	Sierra Smith
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Office hours	Wednesdays 10:00 AM – 2:00 PM *Starting September 9* *Also by appointment*
Office	Old Mill 339

Class

Dates	August 31 – December 12, 2026
Time	Tuesday & Thursday 10:05 – 11:20 AM
Classroom	Billings – Ira Allen MLK
Final exam	No final exam

Course Description

This course provides students with foundational skills in finding, interpreting, and communicating data. It is a practical introduction to working with data: where it comes from, how to use it responsibly, and how to avoid common pitfalls in its interpretation.

In an increasingly data-driven world, the ability to understand and clearly communicate quantitative information is a valuable skill in virtually any career. This course emphasizes that dimension, challenging students to present and analyze data in ways that are accurate, accessible, and meaningful. To that end, it integrates basic numerical reasoning, graphical analysis, written communication, and oral presentation. By the end of the course, students will be equipped to locate and evaluate data sources and communicate data-driven insights with clarity and confidence.

Prerequisites: ECON 1400 and ECON 1450

Textbook: There is no assigned textbook for this course.

Course Structure

This course has two broad goals, **data literacy** and **data analysis**, and the weekly structure gives dedicated attention to both.

Tuesdays: Data Literacy

We will discuss where data come from, how datasets are collected and presented, how to evaluate data quality, common pitfalls in interpretation, and how data are used in economic research, policy, and the media.

Thursdays: Working with Data

We will use Excel to clean and organize datasets, construct variables, perform calculations, create tables and visualizations, and interpret results. Each class has two parts:

- **Guided build:** I work through an example and you follow along.
- **Group exercise:** you apply the same skills to a new problem or dataset.

Because Thursdays are hands-on, you are expected to **bring a laptop to class** and be prepared to work in Excel.

Weekly Exercises

Each week, you will complete a short exercise based on the material covered in class. These exercises give you regular practice applying the skills and concepts introduced throughout the course. The format will vary from week to week and may include tasks such as identifying and evaluating a misleading use of data in the media, locating an appropriate dataset and cleaning the raw data, creating a table or visualization, performing a calculation, interpreting a result, or a combination of these tasks.

The prompt will be given **in class** on a randomly selected class day each week. It will not be posted to Brightspace, emailed, or repeated outside of that class meeting. **To receive the prompt, you must be present in class on the day it is distributed.** This is intended to reward regular attendance and engagement with the course.

Each exercise is due by **11:59 PM on Friday of the following week** and must be submitted through Brightspace. Unless otherwise stated, submit all required files, calculations, figures, and written responses together as directed in the assignment prompt. Late submissions will not be accepted.

Mini Projects

There will be **two** mini projects during the semester. These assignments are larger and more comprehensive than the weekly exercises and are designed to assess your ability to combine several of the skills developed in the course. Rather than focusing on a single skill, these projects will ask you to work through multiple stages of a data-analysis problem and make decisions about how the information should be analyzed and presented.

Detailed instructions, submission requirements, grading criteria, and deadlines for each assignment will be available in the **Mini Projects** folder on Brightspace.

Final Project

The final project is the culminating assignment for the course and gives you the opportunity to apply the data literacy, analysis, and communication skills developed throughout the semester to a topic that interests you.

You will **work in pairs** to select a topic and datasets, develop a focused question that can be addressed using those data, and conduct an appropriate analysis. Your project will require you to demonstrate that you can:

- locate and understand a dataset;
- make appropriate decisions about how it should be prepared and analyzed;
- perform relevant calculations;
- create clear and informative visualizations;
- interpret your findings; and
- communicate both the strengths and limitations of your analysis.

During the **final week of class**, each pair will present its analysis to the class. The presentation should explain your research question, introduce the dataset and relevant variables, describe the analysis you conducted, highlight your main findings, and communicate what those findings allow you to conclude.

More detailed instructions on topic selection, project requirements, presentation expectations, and grading will be provided later in the semester and posted to Brightspace.

Grading

Component	Weight
Weekly exercises	25%
Mini Project 1	20%
Mini Project 2	20%
Final project	35%
Total	**100%**

Drop Policy

As stated previously, no late work will be accepted under any circumstances, including with a note or other documentation. **I mean it.** You are given ample time to complete each assignment, and if you wait until the last minute and something goes wrong, I will not make an exception.

That said, I understand that there are times when life has to come before schoolwork. To account for those situations:

> I will automatically drop your **two lowest weekly exercise grades**, including zeros for assignments that were not submitted. You do not need to provide a note, explanation, or documentation. The drops are applied automatically at the end of the semester.

My advice is to use these drops wisely. Think of them as built-in flexibility for unexpected circumstances, not as assignments you should plan to skip. If you choose not to submit the first two exercises and then an alien abducts you for the entirety of week 3, you'll have a sick story, but a zero for your week 3 exercise.

Participation Incentive

While there is no formal attendance grade, you can be rewarded for regularly attending and participating in class. Each Thursday during the group exercise, you can earn points based on your performance on the assigned tasks. Each exercise is generally worth about 5 points, with approximately 60 total points available over the semester.

> **Earn at least 40 participation points** and you will receive **one additional dropped weekly exercise**, on top of the two drops already built into the course.

Keep in mind that these points accumulate throughout the semester, and group exercises continue through the end of the course. If you are relying on the final few exercises to reach 40 points and do not earn enough, you will not receive the additional drop. In that case, you will still receive the two standard weekly exercise drops.

Grade Scale

Grade	A	A–	B+	B	B–	C+	C	C–	D+	D	D–	F
Score	93+	90	87	83	80	77	73	70	67	63	60	<60

Each score is the minimum for that grade (e.g. B = 83–86). I reserve the right to curve grades if necessary. This is not a guarantee, so try your best on every part of this course.

Students with Disabilities

In keeping with University policy, any student with a documented disability interested in using ADA accommodations should contact Student Accessibility Services (SAS), the office of Disability Services on campus for students. SAS works with students and faculty in an interactive process to explore reasonable and appropriate accommodations, which are communicated to faculty in an accommodation letter.

> If you have an accommodation with SAS, you must provide it to me **within the first two weeks of class** if you wish to use it.

AI Policy

AI can be a useful resource for learning Excel, so limited use is permitted in this course.

You may

- Use AI to troubleshoot Excel errors.
- Use AI to help you understand how a formula or function works.

If you do, you must **disclose** what problem you encountered and how AI helped you resolve it.

You may not

- Use AI to complete the assignment for you, including cleaning the dataset, performing the full analysis, generating all required formulas, or interpreting your results.

AI may help you learn how to do the work, but it may not do the work for you.

Respect Policy

I respect your time

- I will come prepared to help you understand the course material and prepare you for assignments.
- Communication is key: I cannot help you if I do not know what is going on.
- I am here to help you. This is your time, so let me know what I can do to help you succeed.
- If there is something you would like me to do differently, please let me know. I am happy to work with you to make class the best it can be.

Respect my time

- Be on time to class.
- Pay attention when I am lecturing.
- Come to class prepared by doing the work and going to office hours when you need help.

Tips for Success

- Be proactive about your success in the course.
- Do not procrastinate! Begin your assignments early.
- Attend every class.
- Ask questions, whether during class, in office hours, or by email.
- Every time you approach a new concept, think carefully about how it could be applied in your own life.

Bonus: For three bonus points on Mini Project 1, email me a picture of a bunny by **September 4**.

Tentative Schedule

Dates are subject to change depending on the amount of material covered each class.

Week	Tuesday		Thursday	
1	09/01	Welcome	09/03	Why data?
2	09/08	What is a number?	09/10	What is a number?
3	09/15	Producing and cleaning data	09/17	Producing and cleaning data
4	09/22	Numerical reasoning I	09/24	Numerical reasoning I
5	09/29	Numerical reasoning II	10/01	Numerical reasoning II
6	10/06	Tables	10/08	Tables
7	10/13	Graphic design	10/15	Graphic design
8	10/20	Time series and trends	10/22	Time series and trends
9	10/27	Distributions and equality	10/29	Distributions and equality
10	11/03	Comparisons	11/05	Comparisons
11	11/10	Policy models	11/12	Policy models
12	11/17	Relationships	11/19	Relationships
13	11/24	No class	11/26	No class
14	12/01	Communication	12/03	Communication
15	12/08	**Presentations**	12/10	**Presentations**

Final Remark

I view this syllabus as a contract between you and me. While I promise to try my best to honor all that I have detailed, I do reserve the right to make any changes I see necessary.