

**Spring 2017 Course Syllabus**  
**PSY 311: Controversial Issues in Psychology (01)**  
Monday & Wednesdays 8:30 am - 11:50 am, LOH 164  
Department of Psychology

**Instructor:** Walter C. Sá, Ph.D.  
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**Office Hours:** M/W 12:00 pm to 1:00 pm (and by appointment.)  
**Prerequisite:** WRT 150 with "C" or better

### **Course Description**

This course offers a series of critical thinking and communication exercises as ways of exploring current controversies in the field of psychology. Along the way, we will read about and discuss some recent theories (and relevant empirical studies) that tackle the most fundamental question of psychology: What makes us who we are?

### **Course Objectives**

This class does not merely address specific controversial issues, but is also designed to teach critical thinking on a broader level. The course is also an SWS course. Therefore the objectives are as follows:

*Objective 1:* The student will be able to identify areas of psychological controversy and evaluate supporting arguments based on empirical findings.

*Objective 2:* Development of critical thinking skills (analyzing the arguments of other people and forming one's own reasoned judgment).

*Objective 3:* Develop the ability to research and express ideas clearly in a written and oral format.

### **Textbook (Required):**

Stanovich, K.E. (2010). How to think straight about psychology. (10<sup>th</sup> ed). Pearson/ Allyn and Bacon.

### **E-Reserved Readings (Required):**

Aronson, J.D. (2007). Brain imaging, culpability and the juvenile death penalty. Psychology, Public Policy, and Law, 13(2) 115-142.

Baumeister, R.F., Campbell, J.D., Krueger, J.I. & Vohs, K.D. (2003). Does high self-esteem cause better performance, interpersonal success, happiness, or healthier lifestyles? Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 4(1), 1-44.

Dror, I. E., Péron, A. [E.], Hind, S., & Charlton, D. (2005). When emotions get the better of us: The effect of contextual top-down processing on matching fingerprints. Applied Cognitive Psychology, 19, 799-809.

Halpern, D.F., Behbow, C.P., Geary, D.C., Gur, R.C., Hyde, S.J. & Gernsbacher, M.A. (2007). The science of sex differences in science and mathematics. Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 8(1), 1-51.

Kahneman, D. & Klein, G. (2009). Conditions for intuitive expertise: A failure to disagree. American Psychologist, 64(6) 515-526.

- Özgen, E. (2004). Language, Learning, and Color Perception. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 13(3), 95-98.
- Ripley, Amanda. (2010). "Is Cash the Answer." *Time* (April 19). New York, NY: Time Inc.. pp.40-47.
- Shipstead, Z., Redick, T.S. & Engle, R.W. (2010). Does working memory training generalize? *Psychologica Belgica*, 50(3&4), 245-276.
- Stanovich, K. E. (2009, Nov/Dec). The thinking that IQ tests miss. *Scientific American Mind*, 20(6), 34-39.
- Van Oudenhove, L. & Cuypers, S.E. (2010). The philosophical "mind-body problem" and its relevance for the relationship between psychiatry and the neurosciences. *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 53(4), 545-557.
- Wegner, D. M. (2004). Précis of *The illusion of conscious will*. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 27, 649-692.
- West, R. F., Toplak, M. E., & Stanovich, K. E. (2008). Heuristics and biases as measures of critical thinking: Associations with cognitive ability and thinking dispositions. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 100, 930-941.

All these readings are on **E-reserve** (found under the course reserve link on the library webpage).

**NOTE: This is both a tentative & incomplete listing--additional readings may be assigned throughout the term, and some of the above may be dropped. All assigned readings will be announced in class.**

It is **vital** that you keep up with the assigned readings throughout the duration of the course—you will be **expected** to discuss these in class. This engagement with the material will be factored into your grade.

## Course Evaluation

Home Work Assignments	10 points
Class Participation	10 points
In-Class Activities/Attendance	10 points
Class Presentation	10 points
Course Paper	20 points
Quizzes	15 points
Final Exam	25 points

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**Total** **100 points\***

\*Note that since the sum of all points is 100, the terminology "points" and "percentage" are interchangeable in this scheme.

## Home Work Assignments: 10% of final grade

Throughout the term I will be handing out some homework assignments that will be **due at the start of a class**. Each assignment will be given a grade out of 10 points. The final assignment grade will thus be the average you obtain on all the assignments out of 10 points. Make sure you

retain a personal copy of each completed assignment in addition to the copy you submit to me. Assignments must be submitted in typed form (i.e., no hand-written assignments will be accepted.)

**Late assignments:**

Late assignments will receive an automatic 3 point deduction (from the 10 points). Late assignments will NOT be accepted any later than the very START of the class session held subsequent to the original due date of that assignment.

**Class Participation: 10% of final grade**

Your participation in this course is *vital*. In addition to attendance, you must keep up with the assigned readings and be prepared to contribute *thoughtfully* to class discussions. Our class discussions will be highly informed by the assigned readings (in addition to material introduced in lecture / discussion.) The *quality*--not just quantity--of your contributions will be factored into this portion of the score. It is essential that you engage with the reading material in a reflective manner and demonstrate this deep engagement with that content via your contribution to class discussions.

**In-Class Activities/Attendance: 10% of final grade**

The in-class activities will be varied in nature and will be graded on a credit/no credit basis. Most of these will essentially amount to quick “mini” experiments yielding class data that will serve to illustrate upcoming course concepts/material. Other activities will amount to a brief writing exercise during class time geared towards getting you to think about some presented material. Other variations of these in-class assignments may also be used. Most of these in-class activities will be unannounced. One point will be deducted from the score out of 10 for each in-class activity missed.

**Class presentation: 10% of final grade**

Details concerning this portion of your grade will be outlined in class sometime in the next few weeks. Suffice to say for now, that our coverage of the Core Conceptual Topics along with your course paper topic will be very relevant to the presentation. The presentation you make will have its content anchored to the topic of your course paper.

**Course Paper: 20% of final grade**

Details concerning this portion of your grade will be outlined in class sometime in the next few weeks. Suffice to say for now, that our coverage of the Core Conceptual Topics will be very relevant to the presentation.

**Quizzes: 15% of final grade**

There will likely be 4 or equally weighted quizzes. Quizzes may consist of multiple-choice, fill-in the blank, and short answer questions. Questions will be drawn from both lecture and assigned readings. Although there will be much overlap between lecture materials and assigned readings, I will present in class a significant amount of material not found in the assigned readings and will also not cover all assigned reading material in class. A consequence of this is that a significant portion of quizzed material will comprise of content that is unique to lectures, and material that is unique to assigned readings. In other words, to do “well” on the exams you must do both the assigned readings and attend class (which means paying attention and taking good notes--not just physically being there).

**On Quiz days . . .**

Make sure you bring to class a black lead pencil (#2 or softer) and a “good” eraser. You may need one for filling out scantron forms.

A point of caution: Be careful when filling these scantron forms. Bubbles should be filled in properly, and you should thoroughly erase any changed answers. No corrections will be made as a result of errors on your part.

### **On missing quizzes . . .**

**Don't!** Rescheduling quizzes presents problems for the class as a whole, for me as an instructor, and for support staff in the psychology department. Numerous people may be inconvenienced by modifications to course scheduling.

If, however, you miss a quiz for an extremely good reason, be prepared to provide documentation for your justified absence (e.g., a doctor's note) and be prepared to make up the quiz ASAP. This is by no means an issue I take lightly, you **must** have a very good reason for your absence and you **must** be able to document it for me.

If you are going to be absent, get in touch with me ASAP (via phone and/or E-mail)--this is your responsibility (do not wait for me to get in touch with you, or simply wait until you see me at the next class). If I do not hear from you within 24 hours of the quiz, you have forfeited your opportunity to write that quiz.

### **Final Exam: 25% of final grade**

There will be a cumulative final exam. The exam will consist of both short answer questions and some multiple-choice items.

### **Attendance**

Unless your absence falls on a **in-class activity** day, you will not be directly penalized for missing a class (although habitual absences will inform the class participation grade). If you must miss a particular class you need neither secure my consent nor supply me with a reason for the absence. But please note that missing classes will most likely have consequences on your grade in this course: i) I will be presenting material in class that is not covered in the assigned readings; ii) any given assignment must be submitted on the due date in “hard-copy” form at the start of class—no email attachments accepted; iii) any in-class activities will likely be unannounced (see above section on In-Class Activities/Attendance); iv) **I do not provide lecture notes for missed classes**—please do not ask as I can make no exceptions on this out of fairness to all students; v) you may miss important announcements and/or handouts.

### **Please DO NOT email me the following (or variants of the following) questions:**

1. “I missed class today. Did I miss anything important?”
2. “Can you send me the lecture notes that I missed?”
3. “I am going to miss class because . . . will there be an in-class assignment today?”

### **Answers to above questions will always be:**

1. YES.
2. NO.
3. Maybe.

You can mitigate some of the above consequences—see the **A helpful suggestion** section below.

## On being late for classes

It is a mistake to think that missing the first few minutes of class is harmless. All things being equal, the worst x minutes that you could possibly miss in a lecture is usually the **FIRST** x minutes. Those first few minutes of class is where the stage gets set—so to speak—for all the remaining lecture material. Your comprehension of lecture material will often be “challenged” when you miss the preceding material—even just a few minutes.

## A helpful suggestion

Get to know some of your fellow classmates. Pair up with at least one other student as a Lecture-Notes-buddy. That is, in the event you do miss a class, your “Lecture-Notes-buddy” will allow you to photocopy her/his notes for the missed class and inform you of any announcements you missed. **Do not expect the instructor to recap for you an entire missed lecture after class. Do not expect the instructor to provide you the notes for a missed class.**

## Our responsibilities:

Both the professor and student have responsibilities in the teaching / learning process.

My responsibilities as an instructor include...

- being well organized
- being courteous and helpful with students
- providing an updated and informative course
- returning graded quizzes promptly
- being fair and unbiased with grading

Your responsibilities as a student include...

- attending classes and being punctual--especially for quizzes!
- paying attention in class
- taking notes during lectures
- asking questions about material you do not understand
- seeking help with material if you're having difficulty (e.g., meeting with me during an office hour, and/or getting a tutor)
- not creating distractions for other students or the instructor (e.g., excessive talking) **Please turn SILENCE your cell phones.**
- doing the assigned readings and studying the course material

## A note about student dissatisfaction with grades:

An unfortunate reality of any course is that not all students will obtain the final grade they desire. Some students may even fail the course. As an instructor of the course, my responsibility is to ensure that evaluation procedures were fair. To a very large extent, this can be determined by how the class is performing overall. If your performance as a member of this class is substantially below the general class performance, then you cannot simply claim that the evaluation procedures were unfair. Some careful thought has to be given to what else might possibly be wrong, and how it might be changed.

To minimize any damage to your student records, it is important that you consult with me very early once difficulty arises. Don't fall asleep at the wheel--make sure you remain vigilant about your progress in the course.

When students approach me late in the term claiming that they NEED a specified grade, what can I (the instructor) do for them? the answer is nothing. As long as the grading procedures are fair, YOU as a student are in control and responsible for your own grade. As an instructor, I

must be fair with the grading procedures, which includes sticking to the same procedures that applied to the entire class. Deviations on my part from the outlined procedures for any single student amounts to cheating those students who were evaluated under the original scheme.

### Topics:

This class will emphasize five core conceptual topics: i. Critical Thinking; ii. Scientific Thinking; iii. Naturalistic Thinking; iv. Interdisciplinary Thinking; and v. Epistemic Regulation. The meaning behind each of these core conceptual topics (CCT) will be extensively explored in both lecture (and readings.) Please note that these five CCTs should not really be thought of as entirely separate issues—they are intricately related to one another. Indeed one can easily argue that all five could ultimately be collapsed into a single topic on “critical thinking.” These CCTs will serve, however, as a useful structure to organize and highlight targeted aspects of course material. In addition, at the very core of good writing is good thinking. Incorporating principles of our CCT coverage into your writing assignments will be strongly encouraged.

We will first begin the course by addressing each of these CCTs in detail and focus on (a) particular *controversial issue(s)* for emphasis:

1. Core Conceptual Topic: Critical Thinking (& its implications)
  - Controversial issue: The nature of intelligence
2. Core Conceptual Topic: Scientific Thinking (& its implications)
  - Controversial issue: Self-esteem & social/educational policy
3. Core Conceptual Topic: Naturalistic Thinking (& its implications)
  - Controversial issues: The nature of mind, free will & criminal culpability
4. Core Conceptual Topic: Interdisciplinary Thinking (& its implications)
  - Controversial issue: Gender differences, nature vs. nurture & evolution
5. Core Conceptual Topic: Epistemic Regulation
  - Controversial issues: Expertise and intuition, evaluating “beliefs” (Tentative)

This above portion of coverage is fixed into the course plan. *Some* of the below controversial topics will also be inserted/touched upon as we proceed through the above framework:

- Motivation (e.g., should students be paid to learn?)
- Is memory repression possible?
- Does the language you speak shape your thought?
- The psychology of Religion (e.g., do religious beliefs confer benefits to a person, a society?)
- Are humans rational?
- What are the consequences of the internet and various other technologies on our “mind?”
- Do learning styles really exist and should instructors teach to a student’s learning style?
- What is the best way to teach a child to read?

Other topics via student course paper topic selection will also be introduced & discussed in class.

### Some Important Dates:

Last day to receive 100% refund:	<b>May 12</b>
Last day to receive 75% refund:	<b>May 19</b>
Drop Deadline (Grade “W”):	<b>June 9</b>
Final Exam	<b>June 21</b>

**Course Grade Schedule:**

A	92-100 points	B+	88-89 points	C+	78-79 points	D+	68-69 points
A-	90-91 points	B	82-87 points	C	72-77 points	D	60-67 points
		B-	80-81 points	C-	70-71 points	F	< 60 points

**Important:** Your continuation in this course indicates your acceptance of the above schedule and procedures. The above schedule and procedures, however, are subject to some modification in the event of extenuating circumstances.

Course schedule at a glance

Week No.	Monday	Wednesday
1	May 8	May 10 <b>Assignment 1 Due!</b>
2	May 15 <b>Quiz 1 (tentatively)</b>	May 17 <b>Paper Topic Selection Due</b>
3	May 22 <b>Quiz 2 (tentatively)</b>	May 24
4	<b>May 29: Memorial Day, no class</b>	May 31 <b>Quiz 3 (tentatively)</b>
5	June 5	June 7 <b>Quiz 4 (tentatively)</b> <b>COURSE PAPER DUE (Start of class)</b> <b>Student presentations &amp; lecture</b>
6	<b>June 12</b> <b>Student presentations &amp; lecture</b>	June 14 <b>Student presentations &amp; lecture</b>
7	June 19 <b>Student presentations &amp; lecture</b>	June 21 <b>Final Exam <u>9:00 am</u></b>

**NOTE:** The bulk of homework assignment due dates are not indicated above—these will be announced in class. In-class activities also not shown above—these are unannounced.