

**PSY 311-02**  
**CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN PSYCHOLOGY – ONLINE EDITION**

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10:00 – 11:15 a.m.  
(see our course schedule for virtual class dates)

**Instructor: Brian Bowdle**

Virtual Office Hours: by appointment

Email: [bowdleb@gvsu.edu](mailto:bowdleb@gvsu.edu)

Cell Phone: (517) 881-7753

**Course Description**

This course offers a series of critical thinking and communication exercises as ways of exploring current psychological controversies. A wide range of such controversies will be discussed, including ongoing debates within the field of psychology, theoretical disagreements between psychology and neighboring disciplines, and contentious social issues that evoke competing perspectives on human nature. After successfully completing the course, students should be able to (a) identify areas of psychological controversy and explain their significance; (b) recognize the moral and ethical dimensions of such controversies; (c) critically evaluate opposing theoretical arguments, both logically and empirically, in order to form their own reasoned judgments; (d) conduct background research on complex topics in a balanced and systematic manner; and (e) express ideas clearly, persuasively, and professionally in writing. This course is worth three credits.

**Course Modality**

This section of PSY 311 is an online offering. Here is what you need to know:

**Blackboard.** Our Blackboard website is an essential component of this course. In addition to serving as the platform for our virtual class meetings, Blackboard will be used to complete and submit all of our writing assignments. Class announcements, course documents, and grades will also be posted on this website. And I will be using Blackboard to send out emails to members of this class, which means that you should regularly check the messages on your GVSU student email account.

**Virtual Class Meetings.** This is a Tuesday/Thursday class, and – aside from three weeks this semester dedicated to writing (see our course schedule) – we will be meeting synchronously on both days each week. Among other things, these class meetings will be devoted to (a) short lectures on important concepts, (b) conversations and activities extending our readings in new directions, and (c) instructions for upcoming assignments. Everyone is expected to attend on a regular basis.

We will use Blackboard Collaborate Ultra as the platform for our class meetings. You should have reliable access to high-speed internet and a device with both a webcam and a microphone in order to fully participate in these meetings. (If you have any concerns about these technological requirements, contact me so that we can discuss your options.)

To join a meeting, go to Blackboard and click the Virtual Classroom tab in the course menu. This will take you to the Blackboard Collaborate Ultra page. Once you are there, look for the day's Class Session folder, open it, and click the Join Session button. This will take you to our meeting. Oh, and if you are asked for permission to turn on your camera and microphone, please allow for these options – I would prefer to be able to see and hear all of you during class!

I will not be recording any of our virtual class meetings.

**Required Books**

There are five required books for this course, which are listed here in the order we will be reading them:

- Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman (2007) – *Born to Believe: God, Science, and the Origin of Ordinary and Extraordinary Beliefs*

- Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt (2018) – *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*
- Jesse Bering (2013) – *Perv: The Sexual Deviant in All of Us*
- Thomas Chatterton Williams (2019) – *Self-Portrait in Black and White: Unlearning Race*
- Flynn Coleman (2019) – *A Human Algorithm: How Artificial Intelligence Is Redefining Who We Are*

These books constitute the intellectual core of this course, and everyone is expected to keep up with the readings throughout the semester so that they can fully engage in our discussions and activities (see our course schedule for reading assignment dates).

### **Course Evaluation**

The maximum number of points you can receive in this course is 240, and point totals will be translated into grades at the end of the term using this scale:

222 – 240 points = A	174 – 183 points = C
215 – 221 points = A-	167 – 173 points = C-
208 – 214 points = B+	160 – 166 points = D+
198 – 207 points = B	150 – 159 points = D
191 – 197 points = B-	143 – 149 points = D-
184 – 190 points = C+	142 points or less = F

Grades will be cumulatively determined by the following:

**Opening Survey.** Sometime between now and the end of Friday, January 22, you should complete the opinion survey I have posted on our Blackboard site. You can access it by clicking the Opening Survey tab in the course menu. This survey is worth 15 points.

**Book Forums.** The development of critical thinking is in many ways a social enterprise, requiring thoughtful interactions with other individuals whose perceptions, experiences, and beliefs may differ from your own. Therefore, you are expected to participate in a series of online discussion forums, which can be accessed on Blackboard via the Book Forums page. To be more specific, there will be five such forums, each revolving around one of our books (*Born to Believe*, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, *Perv*, *Self-Portrait in Black and White*, and *A Human Algorithm*). **For each of these book forums, you should plan on making 15 thoughtful and substantial contributions.** At least one – but no more than three - of these 15 contributions must be an original item posted as a new thread. Think of these original posts as “conversation starters” in which you raise interesting questions about and/or share your personal reactions to material from the book at hand. The remaining 12 to 14 (out of 15) contributions you make to each forum must be responses to other people’s messages.

I (your instructor) will also be starting threads and posting responses in all of our book forums, and if I make any contributions that I feel everyone should read, I will tag them with the label **Instructor**. But please don’t wait for me to raise particular issues if you’d like to start discussing them. These online conversations should be treated as belonging to all of us.

If you are unfamiliar with Blackboard discussion forums, a short tutorial can be found at <https://www.gvsu.edu/elearn/help/blackboard-using-the-discussion-board-53.htm>.

Here are some additional guidelines for using the book forums:

- Each one of our five book forums will have a two-week window of availability. Once a forum has disappeared, you can no longer post to it.
- Because these forums will work best if everyone in the class remains actively engaged in the discussions as they evolve from day to day, there are four “milestone dates” for each forum, by

which points you are expected to have made a certain number of new contributions. All such due dates will fall on Tuesdays and Fridays – see our course schedule for details.

- Make sure that your contributions to each forum stay “on topic” by relating them to the contents of the book. This will still allow for plenty of flexibility in terms of what you can write about, of course – not only do all of our books cover lots of conceptual territory, but the various twists and turns of our in-class discussions of these books are also fair game for your posts. Moreover, if you can find interesting ways of relating the issues covered in a book to current events, to personal experiences, and/or to material you have discussed in other courses here at GVSU, I encourage you to write about these things as well. But do your best to demonstrate that you have truly read the book in your posts.
- Although there are no specific length requirements for your contributions, you should make sure that all of them are substantial in the sense that they either start a meaningful conversation or move that conversation forward in a thoughtful manner. Generally speaking, such contributions will be more than just three or four sentences in length.
- Make the subject line of any thread you start as descriptive as possible in order to promote the conversation you are wanting to start. (Naming a thread something like “My Initial Thoughts” or “Chapter One” gives people almost no idea of what you’re writing about, and is therefore bad advertising.)
- Avoid starting threads on the very last day a book forum is available. Otherwise, many of your classmates may not have enough time to consider your contribution and post thoughtful responses before the forum disappears.
- Avoid redundancy. It is fine to create a new thread about a topic that others have discussed, but make sure that the content of your post brings something new to the table, as opposed to simply recasting a question that has already been asked or an observation that has already been made.
- Likewise, before you engage with a thread that was created by someone else, read the replies that have already been posted. To the extent that you dive into a thread without considering what has already been shared, you are not doing your part to turn that thread into a genuine conversation.
- You have the option of subscribing to specific threads in our book forums, and I encourage you to do so for any thread you have created or engaged with. This way, if someone (who might be me) questions or challenges something you have posted, you won’t be at risk of blowing them (or me) off by not realizing you have been invited to respond. (A word to the wise: As an instructor, I tend not to take kindly to being blown off by students, so DO reply to me if I ask you something in response to one of your posts.)
- And finally, I expect the tone of our book forums to be respectful and courteous throughout. It is perfectly fine to express different (and perhaps even “unpopular”) viewpoints, and to openly disagree with others, but insulting or antagonistic posts have no place in these forums and will not be tolerated.

Each of the five book forums is worth 15 points, for a combined total of 75 points. If you follow all of the above guidelines regarding the contributions you make to each forum, you will receive full credit.

One more thing: If you would like to make more than 15 contributions to a forum, you can do so, and these additional contributions can serve as **extra credit**. You can earn up to 3 such points per forum, for a possible total of 15 extra credit points across all five forums. These points will be awarded in a comparative manner, such that students with the greatest number of additional contributions will “set the curve” for extra credit scores.

**Homework Assignments.** Ten short homework assignments will be due this term, all of which will be made available to you on Blackboard via the Homework Assignments page. Each of the ten homework assignments is worth 6 points, for a combined total of 60 points. Homework due dates can be found in our course schedule. Every homework will be due on a Wednesday by the end of the day, and will be posted at least one week ahead of time. **Late homework assignments will not be accepted.**

Please note that each homework assignment covers a specific short reading that can be found on our Target Articles page. Along with considering the claims and evidence these articles offer, we will use these articles to examine the communicative functions and persuasive effects of different genres and styles of writing.

**Peer-Reviewed Position Paper.** Over a period of several weeks this semester, you will compose a substantial (1500- to 2000-word) essay arguing for one side or the other of a current controversy in psychology. This writing activity will be divided into three phases:

- 1) Write a draft of your position paper. (The draft will be due by the end of Friday, February 26.)
- 2) Write short reviews of three other position paper drafts submitted by your classmates. (Your reviews will be due by the end of Friday, March 19.)
- 3) Write a revision of your position paper given the reviews you get back from your classmates. (The revision will be due by the end of Friday, April 9.)

This assignment is modeled after the peer review process of many academic publications, and you will be given instruction on how best to offer constructive criticism of other people's writing – and how best to respond to and utilize other people's critical reviews of your own writing. More generally, and throughout the duration of this extended writing activity, we will cover a number of topics relevant to effective writing, including (a) how to locate and evaluate potential sources of information; (b) how to organize your ideas in advance of writing about them; (c) how to recognize logical fallacies in your argumentation; (d) how to compose and format a paper in a professional style (in this case, APA Style); and (e) how to avoid plagiarism in its various guises.

Each of the three writing phases described above will be worth a certain number of points. The draft is worth 20 points, the three peer reviews are worth 30 points (10 points each), and the revision is worth 40 points, for a combined total of 90 points. I will begin offering detailed instructions for the position papers during class on Tuesday, February 9.

### **Additional Thoughts**

Many of the conversations that we will have throughout this course will no doubt provoke strong feelings and challenge your customary ways of thinking about the issues at hand. As you share your thoughts and reactions with others during class, complete our various assignments, and contribute to our book forums, I urge you to repeatedly ask yourself the following questions: How did you come to hold the beliefs that you currently have? What sources of knowledge do you use to support your beliefs? How do you typically respond to evidence or arguments that run contrary to your most cherished beliefs – and how do you typically view people who confront you with such evidence or arguments? What do you do when you recognize contradictions among two or more of your beliefs? And what would it take to make you change a belief that has always struck you as being obviously true? These are all questions that are worth returning to again and again throughout this course ... and throughout life, when you get down to it.

### **Taking this Course as a Supplemental Writing Skills (SWS) Course**

This course is designated SWS. Completion of WRT 150 with a grade of C or better (not C-) is a prerequisite. SWS credit will not be given to a student who completes this course before completing the prerequisite. SWS courses adhere to certain guidelines. Students turn in a total of at least 3000 words of writing. Part of that total may be essay exams, but a substantial amount of it is made up of essays, reports, or research papers. For any significant paper assignments, students will receive assistance with revising their drafts before submitting their final papers for grading. At least four hours of class time will be devoted to writing instruction. At least one-third of the final grade in the course is based on writing assignments. Students must complete this course with a grade of C or better in order to receive SWS credit.

### **Useful Resources**

The Fred Meijer Center for Writing provides writing assistance to all GVSU students, on any type of project and at any stage of the process. The Writing Center employs both undergraduate and graduate writing consultants from across majors and disciplines. Consultants are trained to help writers brainstorm,

organize, or develop their ideas, and they can also help writers edit their own work and document sources correctly. The Center's services are free, and students can drop in virtually or schedule an appointment. Email support is also available (and typically provided within 72 hours of submission). For more information about the Writing Center, visit <http://www.gvsu.edu/wc>.

### **Students with Disabilities**

If anyone in this class has special needs because of a cognitive, physical, or other disability, please let me know, and contact Disability Support Resources (DSR) at (616) 331-2490. Although students with disabilities are held to the same academic standards as all other students, accommodations will be provided as appropriate.

### **GVSU Policies**

This course is subject to all of the GVSU policies regarding enrollment, grading, academic integrity, and fairness listed at <http://www.gvsu.edu/coursepolicies/>.

---

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

Unless stated otherwise, all of our class meetings this semester will run from 10:00 to 11:15 a.m.

### **Introduction**

- January 19     [Virtual Class Meeting](#)
- January 21     [Virtual Class Meeting](#)
- January 22     Complete our opening survey by midnight.

### **The Psychology of Belief**

- January 26     [Virtual Class Meeting](#)  
Finish reading Chapters 1 through 4 of *Born to Believe*.  
Make at least three contributions to the book forum by midnight.
- January 27     Homework 1 (science and religion) is due by midnight.
- January 28     [Virtual Class Meeting](#)
- January 29     Finish reading Chapters 5 and 6 of *Born to Believe*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by midnight.
- February 2     [Virtual Class Meeting](#)  
Finish reading Chapters 7 through 9 of *Born to Believe*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by midnight.
- February 3     Homework 2 (neurocriminology) is due by midnight.
- February 4     [Virtual Class Meeting](#)
- February 5     Finish reading Chapters 10 and the Epilogue of *Born to Believe*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by midnight.

## The New Culture Wars

- February 9      **Virtual Class Meeting** (Instructions will be given for the first phase of the peer-reviewed position paper assignment.)  
Finish reading the Introduction and Chapters 1 through 3 of *The Coddling of the American Mind*.  
Make at least three contributions to the book forum by midnight.
- February 10      Homework 3 (token resistance to sex) is due by midnight.
- February 11      **Virtual Class Meeting**
- February 12      Finish reading Chapters 4 and 5 of *The Coddling of the American Mind*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by midnight.
- February 16      **Virtual Class Meeting**  
Finish reading Chapters 6 through 11 of *The Coddling of the American Mind*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by midnight.
- February 17      Homework 4 (character education) is due by midnight.
- February 18      **Virtual Class Meeting**
- February 19      Finish reading Chapters 12 and 13 and the Conclusion of *The Coddling of the American Mind*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by midnight.

## Writing Week (no class meetings, assigned readings, or homework)

- February 22 –  
February 26      **Work on your position paper draft, which is due by the end of Friday.**

## Sexual Deviance

- March 2      **Virtual Class Meeting** (Instructions will be given for the second phase of the peer-reviewed position paper assignment.)  
Finish reading the Preface and Chapters 1 and 2 of *Perv*.  
Make at least three contributions to the book forum by midnight.
- March 3      Homework 5 (the meaning of “-phobic”) is due by midnight.
- March 4      **Virtual Class Meeting**
- March 5      Finish reading Chapters 3 and 4 of *Perv*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by midnight.
- March 9      **Virtual Class Meeting**  
Finish reading Chapters 5 and 6 of *Perv*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by midnight.
- March 10      Homework 6 (the stigma of pedophilia) is due by midnight. (If you decide to make use of this GVSU break day, please submit Homework 6 before Wednesday, not after.)
- March 11      **Virtual Class Meeting**

March 12      Finish reading Chapter 7 of *Perv*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by midnight.

### **Writing Week (no class meetings, assigned readings, or homework)**

March 15 –  
March 19      Work on your three peer reviews, which are due by the end of Friday.

### **Racial Identity**

March 23      [Virtual Class Meeting](#) (Instructions will be given for the third phase of the peer-reviewed position paper assignment.)  
Finish reading the Prologue and Part One of *Self-Portrait in Black and White*.  
Make at least three contributions to the book forum by midnight.

March 24      Homework 7 (transracialism) is due by midnight.

March 25      [Virtual Class Meeting](#)

March 26      Finish reading Part Two of *Self-Portrait in Black and White*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by midnight.

→ Watch the documentary *What Killed Michael Brown?* by no later than Sunday, March 28.

March 30      [Virtual Class Meeting](#)  
Finish reading Part Three of *Self-Portrait in Black and White*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by midnight.

March 31      Homework 8 (blame analysis) is due by midnight.

April 1        No class meeting – GVSU break day.

April 2        Finish reading the Epilogue of *Self-Portrait in Black and White*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by midnight.

### **Writing Week (no class meetings, assigned readings, or homework)**

April 5 –  
April 9        Work on your position paper revision, which is due by the end of Friday.

### **Technology and the Human Condition**

April 13      [Virtual Class Meeting](#)  
Finish reading the Introduction and Chapters 1 through 3 of *A Human Algorithm*.  
Make at least three contributions to the book forum by midnight.

April 14      Homework 9 (sex differences in the brain) is due by midnight.

April 15      [Virtual Class Meeting](#)

April 16      Finish reading Chapters 4 through 6 of *A Human Algorithm*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by midnight.

- April 20      [Virtual Class Meeting](#)  
Finish reading Chapters 7 and 8 of *A Human Algorithm*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by midnight.
- April 21      Homework 10 (transhumanist values) is due by midnight.
- April 22      [Virtual Class Meeting](#)
- April 23      Finish reading Chapters 9 and 10 of *A Human Algorithm*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by midnight.

## **Conclusion**

- April 29 (10:00  
– 11:50 a.m.)      [Virtual Class Meeting](#)