

# SYLLABUS FOR PSY 311-03 CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN PSYCHOLOGY

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1:00 – 2:15 p.m.  
1179 Kindschi Hall

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## **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 both written and oral formats. This course is worth three credits.

## **Blackboard**

Although we will be meeting in person throughout the semester, our Blackboard website is an essential component of this course. In addition to serving as the platform for a series of online discussions, Blackboard will be used to complete and submit all of our formal writing assignments. Class announcements, course documents, video files, and grades will also be posted on this website. And I will send out messages to members of this class via Blackboard, which means that you should regularly check your GVSU email account.

## **Required Books**

There are six 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*
- Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt (2018) – *The Coddling of the American Mind*
- Christina Hoff Sommers (revised 2013 edition) – *The War Against Boys*
- Jesse Bering (2013) – *Perv*
- Thomas Chatterton Williams (2019) – *Self-Portrait in Black and White*
- Michael Shermer (2018) – *Heavens on Earth*

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 300, and point totals will be translated into grades at the end of the term using this scale:

279 – 300 points = A	219 – 230 points = C
270 – 278 points = A-	210 – 218 points = C-
261 – 269 points = B+	201 – 209 points = D+
249 – 260 points = B	189 – 200 points = D
240 – 248 points = B-	180 – 188 points = D-
231 – 239 points = C+	179 points or less = F

Grades will be cumulatively determined by the following:

**Attendance and Participation.** Your attendance of this course will be recorded, and – along with your in-class participation – is worth 60 points. You are allowed to miss two class meetings for any reason without penalty; after that, however, each unexcused absence will deduct from your attendance score.

**Opening Survey.** Sometime between now and the end of Friday, September 3, 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.

**Homework Assignments.** Eleven homework assignments will be due this term, all of which can be accessed on Blackboard via the Homework Assignments page. With the exception of Homework 10, which is a movie report worth 12 points, each of these assignments is worth 6 points. Thus, all of our homework adds up to a possible total of 72 points. Homework due dates can be found in our course schedule. Late homework assignments will not be accepted.

Please note that most of our homework assignments cover specific short readings that can be found on our Target Articles page. Along with considering the claims and evidence these articles offer, we will use this set of readings to examine the communicative functions and persuasive effects of different genres and styles of writing.

**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, all of which will be made available on Blackboard via the Book Forums page. There will be six such forums this semester, each revolving around one of our required books.

For our three longer books – *Born to Believe*, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, and *Heavens on Earth* – you should plan on making 12 thoughtful and substantial contributions to each of the respective forums. One of these 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 11 contributions should be responses to other people’s messages.

For our three shorter books – *The War Against Boys*, *Perv*, and *Self-Portrait in Black and White* – you should plan on making 9 thoughtful and substantial contributions to each of the respective forums. Once again, one of these contributions must be an original item posted as a new thread. The remaining 8 contributions should 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 six 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 certain “milestone dates” for each forum, by which points you are expected to have made at least three new contributions. All such due dates will fall on Tuesdays and Thursdays – 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 been reading and thinking about 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 dislike 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.

The forums for our three longer books are worth 12 points each, and the forums for our three shorter books are worth 9 points each, for a combined total of 63 points. If you follow all of the above guidelines regarding the contributions you make to each book forum, you will receive full credit.

And one more thing. If you would like to make more than the required number of contributions to a forum, please feel free to do so – these additional contributions can serve as **extra credit**. You are able to earn up to 3 such points per forum, for a possible total of 18 extra credit points across all six 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.

**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, October 22.)
- 2) Write short reviews of three other position paper drafts submitted by your classmates. (Your reviews will be due by the end of Friday, November 12.)

- 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, December 3.)

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, October 5.

### **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 from 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. 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. 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 FOR PSY 311-03

### Introduction

- August 31     **Class meeting** – overview of course.
- September 2   **Class meeting** – the nature of controversial issues.
- September 3   Complete our opening survey.

### The Psychology of Belief

- September 7   **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Read the Preface and Chapters 1 through 4 of *Born to Believe* before class.  
Make at least three contributions to the book forum by the end of the day.
- September 8   Homework 1 (science and religion) is due.
- September 9   **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Read Chapters 5 and 6 of *Born to Believe* before class.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by the end of the day.
- September 13  Homework 2 (neurocriminology) is due.
- September 14  **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Read Chapters 7 through 9 of *Born to Believe* before class.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by the end of the day.
- September 16  **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Read Chapter 10 and the Epilogue of *Born to Believe* before class.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by the end of the day.

### The Psychology of Wisdom

- September 21  **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Read the Introduction and Chapters 1 through 3 of *The Coddling of the American Mind*  
before class.  
Make at least three contributions to the book forum by the end of the day.
- September 22  Homework 3 (token resistance to sex) is due.
- September 23  **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Read Chapters 4 and 5 of *The Coddling of the American Mind* before class.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by the end of the day.
- September 28  **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Read Chapters 6 through 11 of *The Coddling of the American Mind* before class.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by the end of the day.
- September 29  Homework 4 (blame analysis) is due.
- September 30  **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Read Chapters 12 and 13 and the Conclusion of *The Coddling of the American Mind*  
before class.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by the end of the day.

## Position Paper Assignment, Phase One

October 5      **Class meeting** – instructions for the position paper draft.

October 7      **Class meeting** – writing tips.

## Gender and Development

October 12     **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Read the Preface and Chapters 1 and 2 of *The War Against Boys* before class.  
Make at least three contributions to the book forum by the end of the day.

October 13     Homework 5 (empathizing versus systemizing) is due.

October 14     **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Read Chapters 3 through 6 of *The War Against Boys* before class.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by the end of the day.

October 18     Homework 6 (character education) is due.

October 19     **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Read Chapters 7 through 9 of *The War Against Boys* before class.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by the end of the day.

## Position Paper Assignment, Phase Two

October 21     **Class meeting** – instructions for the peer reviews.

October 22     **Submit your position paper draft.**

## Sexual Morality

October 26     *No class – fall break!*

October 27     Homework 7 (the meaning of “-phobic”) is due.

October 28     **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Read the Preface and Chapters 1 and 2 of *Perv* before class.  
Make at least three contributions to the book forum by the end of the day.

November 2    **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Read Chapters 3 through 5 of *Perv* before class.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by the end of the day.

November 3    Homework 8 (the stigma of pedophilia) is due.

November 4    **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Read Chapters 6 and 7 of *Perv* before class.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by the end of the day.

## Position Paper Assignment, Phase Three

November 9    **Class meeting** – instructions for the position paper revision.

November 11   **Class meeting** – more writing tips.

November 12 **Submit your three peer reviews.**

### **Racial Identity**

November 16 **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Read the Prologue and Part One of *Self-Portrait in Black and White* before class.  
Make at least three contributions to the book forum by the end of the day.

November 17 Homework 9 (transracialism) is due.

November 18 **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Read Part Two of *Self-Portrait in Black and White* before class.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by the end of the day.

November 22 Homework 10 (*What Killed Michael Brown?*) is due.

November 23 **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Read Part Three and the Epilogue of *Self-Portrait in Black and White* before class.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by the end of the day.

November 25 *No class – Thanksgiving break!*

### **The Psychology of Living and Dying**

November 30 **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Read the Prologue and Chapters 1 through 3 of *Heavens on Earth* before class.  
Make at least three contributions to the book forum by the end of the day.

December 2 **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Read Chapters 4 through 8 of *Heavens on Earth* before class.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by the end of the day.

December 3 **Submit your position paper revision and cover letter.**

December 6 Homework 11 (conspiracy theories) is due.

December 7 **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Read Chapters 9 and 10 of *Heavens on Earth* before class.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by the end of the day.

December 9 **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Read Chapters 11 and 12 of *Heavens on Earth* before class.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum by the end of the day.

### **Conclusion**

December 14 **Class meeting** – final thoughts.  
(12.00 p.m.)

### **Disclaimer**

The schedule of topics and assignments for this course is subject to change. Any such changes will be announced both on Blackboard and during class.

## SYLLABUS ADDENDUM 1 COVID-19 GUIDANCE

Although GVSU is resuming face-to-face classes this fall, we are by no means out of the woods when it comes to the pandemic. Please read the following carefully.

### University Policies and Procedures

If you have not recently visited the **Lakers Together** website, you should do so soon. There you will find the most up-to-date COVID-19 guidance and resources for current GVSU students. For your convenience, I have included a link to **Lakers Together** in our Blackboard menu.

Here are some reminders regarding the most important university policies and procedures:

- Unless you have an approved exemption, you must be vaccinated by September 30.
- Face coverings must be worn in all classrooms – and must be worn *properly*.
- You must complete the online self-assessment before coming to campus each day.
- If you test positive for, have symptoms of, or are exposed to COVID-19, you must stay home in either quarantine or isolation. Please refer to GVSU's **Student Next Steps for COVID-19** flow chart for detailed instructions on when and how to quarantine or isolate under various circumstances. I have included a link to this flow chart in our Blackboard menu.

### Course-Specific Policies and Procedures

The campuswide practices listed above are meant to create a safer environment for the Laker community. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that some of us will be exposed to the virus this fall. Here are some things to know about how this course will operate in response to COVID-19:

As part of GVSU's contact tracing effort, I will record a brief (30 seconds or so) video during each of our face-to-face class meetings to document where everyone is sitting. Per university policy, these videos will not be shared or used for any purpose other than contact tracing, and will be deleted in ten days.

**If you cannot physically attend class due to quarantine or isolation**, you must notify me in a timely manner, keep me posted regarding your status, and provide any appropriate documentation upon your return. So long as you do these things, any absences due to COVID-19 will be excused, and will not count against your attendance score for this course.

Please note that if a student is in quarantine or isolation, they are still expected to complete all of our scheduled readings and assignments while they are away. Also, depending on when and for how long a student is unable to visit campus, I may ask them to post a certain number of additional contributions to one or more of our book forums in order to make up for the in-class discussions they will miss.

**If I (your instructor) cannot physically attend class due to quarantine or isolation**, I will notify everyone immediately. Depending on when and for how long I am unable to visit campus, I may temporarily move our class meetings to our **Virtual Gathering Space** on Blackboard so that we can continue discussing our readings and assignments together in real time.

And finally, in the event that classes need to go fully online again at GVSU, we are in a very good position to make this transition. All of our assignments are already being submitted via Blackboard, and many of our interactions are already scheduled to happen in our online book forums. The only thing we'll need to change is the modality of our meetings on Tuesdays and Thursdays – and while I prefer face-to-face class discussions (even with masks), we can most certainly continue to have authentic and productive conversations virtually. But let's keep our fingers crossed, right?

Should you have any questions or concerns about any of the above, please do not hesitate to contact me.



## **SYLLABUS ADDENDUM 2**

### **SOME ADVICE FOR DISCUSSING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES**

One of the goals of this course is to foster civil and productive conversations between individuals with diverse perspectives and lived experiences. The advice given below is meant to help us achieve this goal by promoting authentic sharing, active listening, and an open-minded approach to considering different viewpoints – all of which are necessary starting points for genuine dialogue. (Please note that while the recommendations made here should be easy to understand, following these recommendations while discussing controversial issues may take some practice.)

#### **As a speaker ...**

- Speak for yourself – do not feel pressured to represent the views of an entire group (and do not ask others to do so).
- Speak from experience – emphasize stories, not slogans.
- Avoid criticizing others or trying to persuade them that you are right (and they are wrong).
- Avoid antagonistic language (non-preferred labels, sarcasm, rhetorical questions, and so on).
- Avoid making sweeping generalizations about others – ask questions to check your assumptions about people's beliefs.
- If you feel you are being misunderstood, say so, and try to rephrase what you are wanting to convey.

#### **As a listener ...**

- Listen with patience – do not interrupt.
- Listen with resilience, even when something is difficult to hear.
- Listen with charity – do not immediately leap to the worst possible interpretation of something.
- Listen with the intent to learn – if you feel you don't understand something, ask questions for clarification.
- Signal your appreciation for honesty and authenticity.
- Acknowledge points of agreement along with points of disagreement.

#### **Cooperatively (as a group) ...**

- Treat the conversation as a dialogue, not a debate – build upon each other's perspectives.
- Look for (and explore) shared values, goals, and concerns to cultivate empathy and trust.
- Practice intellectual humility – admit to (and explore) ambiguities and uncertainties.
- Practice reciprocity – do not allow certain voices to dominate.
- Practice inclusiveness – do not shut down certain voices based on identity.
- If anyone feels disrespected, they should say so, but (again) without using antagonistic language.
- If emotions seem to be running high, be willing to pause the conversation.

Now, as we will also learn in this course, some of this advice runs counter to the tenets of critical thinking in that it emphasizes subjectivity (personal experiences) over objectivity (facts) and thus downplays the importance of informed skeptical inquiry. However, skepticism is rarely a good starting point for conversations between individuals with opposing viewpoints. And while we will eventually strive to collectively engage in critical thinking about various controversial issues – something that will require valuing logic and empirical evidence over our perceptions and emotions – we won't be able to do this effectively without first establishing a certain degree of trust and mutual understanding when it comes to these issues. In other words, let's do our best to start each new conversation by following the above recommendations.