

PSY 311-01
CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN PSYCHOLOGY

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 8:30 – 9:45 a.m.
2107 Au Sable 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, contentious social issues that evoke competing perspectives on human nature, and the validity of various “folk” conceptions of how our minds work. 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

Our Blackboard website is an integral 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 our formal writing assignments. Course documents, video files, and grades will also be posted on this website. And I will be using Blackboard to post important announcements and to send messages to members of this class, which means that you should regularly check your GVSU student email account.

Required Books

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

- Mónica Guzmán (2022) – *I Never Thought of It That Way*
- Richard Paul & Linda Elder (2020) – *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking* (eight edition)
- Coleman Hughes (2024) – *The End of Race Politics*
- Frans de Waal (2022) – *Different*
- Chris French (2024) – *The Science of Weird Shit*

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 will be recorded, and – along with your in-class participation – is worth 78 points. You are allowed to miss two class meetings for any reason without penalty. After that, however, each unexcused absence will deduct 3 points from your attendance score.

GVSU's official attendance policy, which includes information about what counts as an excused absence, can be found at <https://www.gvsu.edu/catalog/2021-2022/navigation/academic-policies-and-regulations.htm#anchor-44>. I will need some kind of documentation to forgive more than two missed sessions.

On a different note, there will be certain days on which everyone needs to bring their copy of whichever book we are currently discussing to class so that we can do close readings of specific sections together. These days will be announced in advance on Blackboard.

Opening Survey. Sometime between now and the end of Friday, August 29, you should complete the opinion survey I have posted on our Blackboard site. You can access it by opening the *Setting the Stage* module on the main content page. This survey is worth 6 points.

Homework Assignments. Eleven homework assignments will be due this term, all of which can be found on Blackboard in their relevant modules. Each of these assignments is worth 6 points, for a combined total of 66 points. Homework due dates are listed in our course schedule. Late homework assignments will not be accepted.

With just one exception, each homework assignment relates to a specific target article that is posted on Blackboard directly below that homework's submission link. Along with considering the claims and evidence these articles offer, we will use these 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 book forums, all of which will be made available on Blackboard via their relevant modules.

Here's how this will work:

For four of our five books, there will be either two or three weeklong forums – two for *I Never Thought of It That Way*, two for *The End of Race Politics*, three for *Different*, and three for *The Science of Weird Shit*. Each of these ten forums is worth 6 points, for a combined total of 60 points.

Every forum will be introduced by a prompt stating (a) the specific chapters of the book to be discussed and (b) the deadlines for posts. New discussions should be created as responses to my opening prompt. Discussions can then be continued by replying to these responses (or to other replies).

There are two paths you can take to receive the full 6 points for any of these weeklong forums. If you follow the first path, you will create one new discussion and post three replies to other people's posts. If you follow the second path, you will simply post six replies during the week. Either way, all your contributions should be thoughtful and substantial.

Whenever you decide to take the first path listed above and begin a new discussion, you should think of your post as a "conversation starter" in which you raise interesting questions about and/or share your personal reactions to material from the book at hand. You should also help folks quickly figure out what your discussion is about by making the first line of your post a short but descriptive title and using the text editor to bold your title line. The deadline for beginning a discussion in any weeklong forum is the end of Thursday, and you may only begin one new discussion in any weeklong forum.

I (your instructor) will also be creating new discussions and posting replies in all our book forums. But please don't wait for me to raise specific issues if you'd like to start talking about them. These online conversations should be treated as belonging to all of us.

Here are some additional guidelines:

- Each of our weeklong book forums will open Monday morning and close Sunday evening. Once a forum has closed, you can no longer post to it.
- 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 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.
- 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 new discussion you create as descriptive as possible to promote the conversation you are wanting to start. (Naming a new discussion 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 redundancy. It is fine to begin a discussion about a topic that others have written about, 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 in a discussion that was created by someone else, read the replies that have already been posted. To the extent that you dive into a discussion without considering what has already been shared, you are not doing your part to turn that discussion into a genuine conversation.
- You have the option of responding to replies in a discussion, and I encourage you to do so whenever someone (who might be me) questions or challenges something you have posted.
- 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.

Please note that at least half of your contributions to any forum should *clearly demonstrate* that you have been reading and thinking about the book at hand. If most of your posts could easily have been written by someone who has never even opened the book, 2 points will be deducted from your score for the forum.

Also, you should engage with each forum *at different points in the week* to help keep the conversations going. If all your posts are made within a single 24-hour period, 2 points will be deducted from your score for the forum.

If you follow all the above guidelines regarding the contributions you make to each forum, you will receive full credit. Oh, and you can earn up to 2 extra credit points per weeklong book forum (for a possible total of 20 extra credit points across all ten forums) by going above and beyond with your replies. These points will be awarded in a comparative manner, such that students with the greatest number of additional replies will "set the curve" for extra credit.

Peer-Reviewed Position Paper. Throughout much of this course, you will be working on a substantial (1500- to 2000-word) essay evaluating both sides 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 24.)
- 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 14.)
- 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 Monday, December 8.)

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, September 16.

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 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 Student Accessibility Resources (SAR) 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 the GVSU policies regarding enrollment, grading, academic integrity, and fairness listed at <http://www.gvsu.edu/coursepolicies/>.

Generative AI Policy

Generative AI tools (such as ChatGPT and Copilot) are evolving at a rapid rate, and you may already recognize some of the ways this technology can enhance productivity. For the purposes of this course, however, these tools should not be adopted as shortcuts to avoid reading, thinking, and writing for yourself.

The use of generative AI is permitted in this course for the following activities:

- Finding information about a topic;
- Brainstorming and refining your ideas;
- Drafting an outline to organize your thoughts; and
- Checking the grammar and style of your writing.

The use of generative AI is NOT permitted in this course for the following activities:

- Writing a draft of an assignment;
- Creating paragraphs or even single sentences to complete assignments; and
- Impersonating you in online class activities.

Any such unauthorized applications of generative AI tools will be treated as academic misconduct.

You should also refrain from using AI reading assistants to create summaries of any of our books and articles as a way to sidestep actually reading them. Such summaries nearly always miss the intellectual and emotional nuances of the original material, convey almost none of the author's voice and style, and sometimes contain major inaccuracies ("hallucinations"). By engaging directly with each of our readings, you will develop a far deeper understanding and appreciation of the author's message.

If you wind up having any questions or concerns about my generative AI policy – this is new territory, after all – please do not hesitate to reach out to me.

COURSE SCHEDULE FOR PSY 311-01

Setting the Stage

- August 26 **Class meeting** – overview of course.
- August 28 **Class meeting** – the nature of controversial issues.
- August 29 Complete our opening survey.

Reasoning and Discourse

- September 1 Book Form 1A opens.
- September 2 **Class meeting** – discussion.
Finish reading the Introduction and Chapters 1 through 3 of *I Never Thought of It That Way*.
- September 3 Homework 1 is due.
- September 4 **Class meeting** – discussion.
Finish reading Chapters 4 through 7 of *I Never Thought of It That Way*.
- September 7 Book Forum 1A closes.
- September 8 Book Forum 1B opens.
- September 9 **Class meeting** – discussion.
Finish reading Chapters 8 through 13 of *I Never Thought of It That Way*.
- September 10 Homework 2 is due.
- September 11 **Class meeting** – discussion.
Finish reading Chapters 14 and 15 and the Epilogue of *I Never Thought of It That Way*.
- September 14 Book Forum 1B closes.
- September 16 **Class meeting** – instructions for phase one of the position paper assignment.
Finish reading *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking* (all).
- September 17 Homework 3 is due.
- September 18 **Class meeting** – discussion.

Race and Culture

- September 22 Book Forum 2A opens
- September 23 **Class meeting** – discussion.
Finish reading the Introduction, Chapter 1, and Appendix A of *The End of Race Politics*.
- September 24 Homework 4 is due.
- September 25 **Class meeting** – discussion.
Finish reading Chapters 2 and 3 and Appendices B and C of *The End of Race Politics*.

- September 28 Book Forum 2A closes.
- September 29 Book Forum 2B opens.
- September 30 **Class meeting** – discussion.
Finish reading Chapters 4 and 5 and Appendix D of *The End of Race Politics*.
- October 1 Homework 5 is due.
- October 2 **Class meeting** – discussion.
Finish reading Chapter 6 of *The End of Race Politics*.
- October 5 Book Forum 2B closes.

Sex and Gender

- October 6 Book Forum 3A opens.
- October 7 **Class meeting** – discussion.
Finish reading the Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2 of *Different*.
- October 8 Homework 6 is due.
- October 9 **Class meeting** – discussion.
Finish reading Chapters 3 through 5 of *Different*.
- October 12 Book Forum 3A closes.
- October 13 Book Forum 3B opens.
- October 14 **Class meeting** – discussion.
Finish reading Chapters 6 and 7 of *Different*.
- October 15 Homework 7 is due.
- October 16 **Class meeting** – discussion.
Finish reading Chapters 8 and 9 of *Different*.
- October 19 Book Forum 3B closes.
- October 21 No class – fall break.
- October 23 **Class meeting** – instructions for phase two of the position paper assignment.
- October 24 **Submit your position paper draft.**
- October 27 Book Forum 3C opens.
- October 28 **Class meeting** – discussion.
Finish reading Chapters 10 and 11 of *Different*.
- October 29 Homework 8 is due.
- October 30 **Class meeting** – discussion.
Finish reading Chapters 12 and 13 of *Different*.

November 2 Book Forum 3C closes.

Natural and Supernatural

November 3 Book Forum 4A opens.

November 4 **Class meeting** – discussion.
Finish reading the Preface and Chapters 1 and 2 of *The Science of Weird Shit*.

November 5 Homework 9 is due.

November 6 **Class meeting** – discussion.
Finish reading Chapters 3 and 4 of *The Science of Weird Shit*.

November 9 Book Forum 4A closes.

November 11 **Class meeting** – reading, writing, and thinking in the digital era.

November 13 **Class meeting** – instructions for phase three of the position paper assignment.

November 14 **Submit your three position paper reviews.**

November 17 Book Forum 4B opens.

November 18 **Class meeting** – discussion.
Finish reading Chapters 5 through 7 of *The Science of Weird Shit*.

November 19 Homework 10 is due.

November 20 **Class meeting** – discussion.
Finish reading Chapters 8 and 9 of *The Science of Weird Shit*.

November 23 Book Forum 4B closes.

November 25 No class – Thanksgiving break.

November 27 No class – Thanksgiving break.

December 1 Book Forum 4C opens.

December 2 **Class meeting** – discussion.
Finish reading Chapters 10 and 11 of *The Science of Weird Shit*.

December 3 Homework 11 is due.

December 4 **Class meeting** – discussion.
Finish reading Chapter 12 and the Epilogue of *The Science of Weird Shit*.

December 7 Book Form 4C closes.

Conclusion

December 8 **Submit your position paper revision and cover letter.**

December 11 **Class meeting** – final thoughts.
(8:00 a.m.)