

Fall 2023 Course Syllabus
PSY 311.03: Controversial Issues in Psychology
Tuesday & Thursdays 10:00 am - 11:15 am, ASH 1204
Department of Psychology

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Office Hours: T/TH 1:30 - 2:30 (& by appointment)

NOTE: When you wish to send me a message, **please do so using the email address listed above.** Please do not use the messaging feature found on Blackboard Ultra as that will not be monitored nearly as well as incoming emails.

Course Description

This course develops the skills of critical thinking (e.g., analyzing the arguments of other people and forming one's own reasoned position) using controversial issues for instruction content. The course will present a series of critical thinking and communication exercises as ways of exploring controversies found in the field of psychology.

Course Objectives

While this class will address specific controversial issues, its focus is more on teaching critical thinking at a broader level. The course is also an SWS course. Therefore the objectives are as follows:

Objective 1: Identify areas of psychological controversy and evaluate supporting arguments based on empirical findings.

Objective 2: Demonstrate critical thinking skills.

Objective 3: Research and explain ideas clearly in a written format.

Objective 4: Present ideas clearly in oral format.

Textbook & eReadings

Pinker, Steven (2021). Rationality: What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters. Viking. **(Required)**

Several mandatory readings will be made available via Blackboard (i.e., eReadings). All assigned readings will be announced in class (and via Blackboard). It is vital that you keep up with 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

I. Exams (40%)

Midterm Exam	20 points (20%)
Final Exam	20 points (20%)

II. Assignments (45%)

Reading Assignments	20 points (20%)
Course Paper	20 points (20%)
Class Presentation	5 points (5%)

III. Participation (20%)

Attendance	5 points (5%)
Class Discussions	10 points (10%)

Course Grade Schedule (& “rounding-up” policy)

A	93-100%	B+	88-89%	C+	78-79%	D+	68-69%
A-	90-92%	B	82-87%	C	72-77 %	D	60-67%
		B-	80-81%	C-	70-71%	F	< 60%

For purposes of letter grade submission, numerical scores are rounded up from the **second decimal place value** to the nearest whole number (i.e., xx.45 and greater). For example, 81.45, (a B-) would be rounded up to an 82 (a straight B.) An 81.44, however would remain a B- (the grade threshold does need to be placed somewhere.)

Exams

The midterm exam will consist of short answer (~2/3 of exam weight) and multiple choice questions (~1/3 of exam weight). The final exam will also consist of short answer (~1/3 to 1/2 of exam weight) and multiple choice questions (~2/3 to 1/2 of exam weight). Questions will be drawn from both lectures and assigned readings. The **final exam** will be cumulative.

Emergency closings: In the event that the university closes on the date of the scheduled midterm exam, the affected exam will be held during our next regularly scheduled class period.

Assignments

Assignments **MUST** be submitted by the stated due date for full credit (typically the night before a class in which we will discuss that material). A total of 20 points will be made available via these assignments. The weight of each specific assignment will vary.

Late assignments will receive an automatic 50% reduction in point-value).

Assignments more than 48 hours late will receive a grade of zero.

Course Paper

Details concerning this portion of your grade will be outlined in class sometime in the near future. Suffice to say for now that you will choose your own “controversial” issue in psychology to write about, perform a literature search on this issue, and ideally incorporate some of the “intellectual tools” we will cover in this class in your discussion of this issue. The controversial issue you pick also needs to be something which has been addressed using some empirical methods.

Class presentation

Details concerning this portion of your grade will be outlined later. The topic of your class presentation will be anchored to your chosen course paper topic.

Participation

Your participation in this course is *vital*. In addition to just basic physical **attendance** in class, **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 class.) 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.

Attendance: Attendance is a minimal expectation in this class and it will reflect upon your grade. One or two unexcused absences will not affect your attendance score. **Each subsequent absence beyond your second, however, will result in a one point deduction** from the 5 points allocated for this portion of your grade. I will not be making any presented slides available for missed classes.

Class Discussions: This class will strongly encourage student contribution to the discussion of both material presented in lecture and assigned readings. Your level of engagement with the material, as evidenced by these contributions to discussions, will be factored into your grade.

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 share their notes and any handouts with you.

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 often the **FIRST** x minutes. Those first few minutes of class is when the context for all the remaining lecture material often gets outlined. Your comprehension of lecture material will often be “challenged” when you miss the preceding material.

Our responsibilities

Both the professor and student have responsibilities in the teaching / learning process. My responsibilities as an instructor include...

- providing an informative course
- being well organized
- being courteous and helpful with students
- returning graded materials promptly
- being fair and unbiased with grading (e.g., neither discriminating or privileging any student over other students)

Your responsibilities as a student include...

- **attending classes** and being punctual--especially for exams!
- **paying attention**, taking notes, and contributing to class discussions
- seeking help with material if you are having difficulty (e.g., meeting with me)
- doing the assigned readings and studying the course material
- being courteous to your fellow students (& instructor) by not creating distractions during class (e.g., silence your phones and refrain from “chatting” with other students during the class sessions)
- **In addition to silencing your phone, please stow your phone away during the class session.**

Important note about Laptop Computers in class

FYI: Research indicates that students that write their notes by hand do better than those that use laptops in class.

If you really must use a laptop in class, then please **insure that you are utilizing it solely for taking notes** (e.g., don't be watching videos, playing games etc). This matter is not just about how these “extracurricular” computer activities will distract you from the focal class material, but how this also serves to distract those students around you.

Topics

This class will emphasize **critical thinking**. Critical thinking will be approached in the broad sense that equates it with what is typically thought of as **rational thinking**. Indeed, for purposes of this class the terminology “critical thinking” and “rational thinking” will be interchangeable. As such, this class will emphasize thinking skills related to **scientific inference** and **methods, logic**, some **quantitative reasoning**, and various sorts of other “**intellectual tools**” and issues relevant to rational thought.

There will be two phases to this course. First, the class will start off with an overview of “rationality” and cover some important intellectual tools in service of rational thinking. While some controversial issues will be embedded for illustrative purposes in this initial overview, the focus will be primarily of the “metacognitive” variety since we will be emphasizing the thinking processes themselves (i.e., thinking about thinking).

After we review some important intellectual tools for rational thinking, the class will then move on to a second phase in which we will focus more heavily upon various specific controversial issues in psychology. The below list serves as examples of *some possible* controversial issues to be discussed in this class:*

- Intelligence (e.g., What is it? Can it really be measured with a test?)
- Sex differences (e.g., Do they exist? Does biology play a role?)
- Just how beneficial is self-esteem (e.g., should schools aim to increase it?)
- Can people truly repress traumatic memories?
- How reliable is eye-witness testimony?
- Do we truly have free will?
- Is addiction really a “brain-disease?”
- Should we motivate students by paying them for academic achievement?
- Does language influence thought? Does the language you speak change the way you think?
- Do brain training programs really work?
- How reliable are our “gut feelings?”
- Do learning styles really exist? Should these be utilized in instruction?
- Is modern technology affecting our cognitive abilities (e.g., is it diminishing attention spans)?
- How important is the theory of evolution to understanding human behavior?
- Does having a religion confer benefits to an individual, or to a society?

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

* NOTE: Not all of these will be addressed and other possible topics may also be included.

Important dates:

Last day 100% refund	Sept. 1
Last day 75% refund	Sept. 22
Midterm Exam	Oct. 12
Fall Break	No Class Tue Oct 24
Drop deadline with a grade of "W"	Nov 10
Course Paper due (<u>hard-copy</u> in class)	Nov. 14
Final Exam	Thursday Dec 14 10:00 am

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.