

**PSY 311-02**  
**CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN PSYCHOLOGY**

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11:30 a.m. – 12:45 p.m.  
2132 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, 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**

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.

Please note that GVSU moved from Blackboard Classic to Blackboard Ultra over the summer. If you are unfamiliar with this new version of Blackboard, not to worry – I will be offering an overview during the first week of class.

**Required Books**

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

- John V. Petrocelli (2021) – *The Life-Changing Science of Detecting Bullshit*
- Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt (2018) – *The Coddling of the American Mind*
- Carole Hooven (2021) – *T*
- 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 270, and point totals will be translated into grades at the end of the term using this scale:

251 – 270 points = A	197 – 207 points = C
243 – 250 points = A-	189 – 196 points = C-
235 – 242 points = B+	181 – 188 points = D+
224 – 234 points = B	170 – 180 points = D
216 – 223 points = B-	162 – 169 points = D-
208 – 215 points = C+	161 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 60 points. Each unexcused absence will deduct two 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>.

**Homework Assignments.** Ten homework assignments will be due this term, all of which can be found on Blackboard in the Homework Assignments folder. Each of these assignments is worth 6 points, for a combined total of 60 points. Homework due dates are listed in our course schedule. Late homework assignments will not be accepted.

Please note that every homework assignment relates to a specific target article that can also be found in the Homework Assignments folder. 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 the Discussions page. There will be five such forums this semester, each revolving around one of our required books.

For any given book forum, you should plan on making 12 thoughtful and substantial contributions. One of these contributions must be an original item posted as a new discussion. 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.

I (your instructor) will also be creating new discussions and posting responses 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.

Basic information about how to engage in discussions on Blackboard Ultra can be found at <https://help.blackboard.com/Learn/Student/Ultra/Interact/Discussions>. And I will offer a short tutorial at the start of our second week of class.

Here are some additional guidelines:

- Each one of our five book forums will have a two-week window of availability, after which it will be archived in a Blackboard folder. Once a forum has been archived, you can no longer post to it for credit.
- 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 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 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 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 creating new discussions 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 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 responses 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 replying to responses 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.

Each of the five book forums is worth 12 points, for a combined total of 60 points. If you follow all the above guidelines regarding the contributions you make to each 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 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.

**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 Sunday, October 29.)
- 2) Write short reviews of three other position paper drafts submitted by your classmates. (Your reviews will be due by the end of Sunday, November 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 Wednesday, December 13.)

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 3.

### **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 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 the GVSU policies regarding enrollment, grading, academic integrity, and fairness listed at <http://www.gvsu.edu/coursepolicies/>.

## COURSE SCHEDULE FOR PSY 311-02

### Introduction

- August 29 **Class meeting** – overview of course.
- August 31 **Class meeting** – the nature of controversial issues.

### Bias and Bullability

- September 4 Book forum for *The Life-Changing Science of Detecting Bullshit* opens.
- September 5 **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Finish reading the Introduction and Chapter 1 of *The Life-Changing Science of Detecting Bullshit*.  
Make at least three contributions to the book forum.
- September 6 Homework 1 is due.
- September 7 **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Finish reading Chapters 2 and 3 of *The Life-Changing Science of Detecting Bullshit*.
- September 8 Make at least three more contributions to the book forum.
- September 12 **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Finish reading Chapters 4 and 5 of *The Life-Changing Science of Detecting Bullshit*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum.
- September 13 Homework 2 is due.
- September 14 **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Finish reading Chapter 6 and the Conclusion of *The Life-Changing Science of Detecting Bullshit*.
- September 15 Make at least three more contributions to the book forum.
- September 17 Book forum for *The Life-Changing Science of Detecting Bullshit* closes.

### Safety and Resilience

- September 18 Book forum for *The Coddling of the American Minds* opens.
- September 19 **Class meeting** – discussion.  
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.
- September 20 Homework 3 is due.
- September 21 **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Finish reading Chapters 4 and 5 of *The Coddling of the American Mind*.
- September 22 Make at least three more contributions to the book forum.

- September 26 **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Finish reading Chapters 6 through 11 of *The Coddling of the American Mind*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum.
- September 27 Homework 4 is due.
- September 28 **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Finish reading Chapters 12 and 13 and the Conclusion of *The Coddling of the American Mind*.
- September 29 Make at least three more contributions to the book forum.
- October 1 Book forum for *The Coddling of the American Minds* closes.

### **Position Paper Assignment, Phase One**

- October 3 **Class meeting** – instructions for the position paper draft.
- October 5 **Class meeting** – research and writing tips.

### **Sex and Gender**

- October 9 Book forum for *T* opens.
- October 10 **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Finish reading Chapters 1 through 3 of *T*.  
Make at least three contributions to the book forum.
- October 11 Homework 5 is due.
- October 12 **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Finish reading Chapters 4 and 5 of *T*.
- October 13 Make at least three more contributions to the book forum.
- October 17 **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Finish reading Chapters 6 through 8 of *T*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum.
- October 18 Homework 6 is due.
- October 19 **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Finish reading Chapters 9 and 10 of *T*.
- October 20 Make at least three more contributions to the book forum.
- October 22 Book forum for *T* closes.

### **Fall Break**

- October 24 **No class meeting** – scheduled day off.
- October 26 **No class meeting** – bonus day off.

## Position Paper Assignment, Phase Two

- October 29     **Submit your position paper draft.**
- October 31     **Class meeting** – instructions for the peer reviews.
- November 2     **Class meeting** – research and writing tips.

## Identity and Race

- November 6     Book forum for *Self-Portrait in Black and White* opens.
- November 7     **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Finish reading the Prologue and Part One of *Self-Portrait in Black and White*.  
Make at least three contributions to the book forum.
- November 8     Homework 7 is due.
- November 9     **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Finish reading Part Two of *Self-Portrait in Black and White*.
- November 10    Make at least three more contributions to the book forum.
- November 14    **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Finish reading Part Three of *Self-Portrait in Black and White*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum.
- November 15    Homework 8 is due.
- November 16    **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Finish reading the Epilogue to *Self-Portrait in Black and White*.
- November 17    Make at least three more contributions to the book forum.
- November 19    Book forum for *Self-Portrait in Black and White* closes.

## Position Paper Assignment, Phase Three

- November 19    **Submit your three peer reviews.**
- November 21    **Class meeting** – instructions for the position paper revision.

## Thanksgiving Break

- November 23    **No class meeting.**

## Life and Death

- November 27    Book forum for *Heavens on Earth* opens.
- November 28    **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Finish reading the Prologue and Chapters 1 through 3 of *Heavens on Earth*.  
Make at least three contributions to the book forum.
- November 29    Homework 9 is due.

- November 30 **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Finish reading Chapters 4 through 8 of *Heavens on Earth*.
- December 1 Make at least three more contributions to the book forum.
- December 5 **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Finish reading Chapters 9 and 10 of *Heavens on Earth*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the book forum.
- December 6 Homework 10 is due.
- December 7 **Class meeting** – discussion.  
Finish reading Chapters 11 and 12 of *Heavens on Earth*.
- December 8 Make at least three more contributions to the book forum.
- December 10 Book forum for *Heavens on Earth* closes.

### **Conclusion**

- December 12 **Class meeting** – final thoughts.  
(10:00 a.m.)
- December 13 ***Submit your position paper revision and cover letter.***

### **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.