

Philosophy 210: Reason in Communication

Fall 2017

Humanities 1131

M/W/F 11:00am-11:50am

Instructor: Greg Nirshberg

Email: nirshberg@wisc.edu

Office: 5174 Helen C. White

Office Hours: Thursdays 11:00am – 1:00pm

Teaching Assistant: Katie Petrik

Email: kpetrik@wisc.edu

Office: 5142 Helen C. White

Office Hours: Wednesdays 12:00pm – 2:00pm

Course Description

The primary aim of this course is to help you develop a set of skills that will allow you to become a more nuanced and careful thinker. Consider the following claims:

- You should stay in and study this weekend instead of going to the party.
- You should take that year off to travel and then take a shot at that start-up instead of finishing your degree.
- Climate change is occurring and it is primarily manmade.
- The US should have more stringent immigration restrictions.

Say I'm trying to convince you to believe the above claims. There are several different ways I might do so. Some of those ways might convince you, but they might convince you for the wrong reasons. For instance, I might say things that are psychologically convincing, but that don't actually support the claim in question. Advertisers, salesmen and politicians take advantage of these techniques all the time. All is not hopeless though. We can avoid ill-formed beliefs by demanding that the reasons offered for a claim support that claim. In other words, we can evaluate the argument for that claim. But what different kinds of arguments are there? What makes an argument a good argument? And how can we better spot instances when an argument fails to support its conclusion? These are questions we will investigate in detail for most of this class.

Contact Information

Please email me at the address listed above. I check my email regularly and will do my best to respond within 24 hours, but if you don't hear back from me within those 24 hours, email me again as a reminder. One caveat: do not ask for difficult course help through email. Rather, come to office hours, where I can best help you with difficult questions. If you have a conflict with my office hours, email me and we can set up an appointment for an alternate meeting time. I'm happy to accommodate!

Readings

There is no assigned textbook for this class, and all class readings can be found on Learn@UW. Though students are not required to purchase any texts, many of the readings have been taken from the following few excellent sources: *Critical Thinking* by Brooke Moore & Richard Parker, *An Introduction to Probability and Inductive Logic* by Ian Hacking, and *Evidence and Evolution* by Elliott Sober. Any materials handed out in class, including this syllabus, will be posted there.

Grade Composition

Problem Sets (8 x 4%)	32%
Exam #1	20%
Exam #2	20%
Final Exam	20%
Participation	8%

Grading Scale

A	92.5% - 100%
AB	87.5% - 92.5%
B	82.5% - 87.5%
BC	77.5% - 82.5%
C	70% - 77.5%
D	60% - 70%
F	0% - 60%

There will be no opportunity for extra credit. I also will not impose a curve on any individual assignment, or your final grades. However, I do not want one bad grade on an assignment to ruin an otherwise strong performance, and I also place value in demonstrated progress over the course of a semester. I am happy to take these sorts of things into account on a case by case basis at the end of the semester.

Course Requirements

The following is a breakdown of the various requirements which determine your grade for the course.

Problem Sets

You will have nine problem sets throughout the semester. These problem sets will have two parts. One part will consist of problems that I construct, and which will allow you to practice the skills you've acquired in class. The other part will ask you to go out into the real world (well, the internet), and apply these skills to real life situations! All assignments will be posted at learn@UW. Some will be due via learn@UW, while some will require you to bring a hard copy to class. The proper submission method will be clearly indicated on the assignment itself. All problem sets will be due Monday mornings, either before lecture, or in lecture, depending on the submission method for that day.

Note: Though you will be asked to hand in a total of *nine* problem sets, your grade will be determined by taking your top *eight* scores. This means you have one freebee. Use it wisely!

Exams

There will be three exams in this course, two during lecture periods, and one on your regularly scheduled final date. The dates for the exams are as follows: October 6th, November 3rd, December 20th. The exams will *not* be cumulative.

Participation

Acquiring a new skill requires practice, and you'll have the opportunity to practice the skills you are acquiring during weekly discussion sections. I will not take attendance in lecture, but you will find it very difficult to do well in this class without attending both lecture and discussion. Although there is a participation grade, I want you to feel comfortable participating without worrying about its effect on your final grade. It is impossible to improve your reasoning abilities without talking and making mistakes. Think of lecture and section as a free space to try out ideas and clear up confusions before exams and problem sets. We will *never* penalize someone for making a mistake in lecture or section.

Class Policies

Academic misconduct and plagiarism

Academic misconduct in any form—including plagiarizing from a published source or classmate—will not be tolerated. Penalties for such violations will be adjudicated based on the severity of the offence, and may range from receiving an F on an assignment to failure of the course. For more details on what actions constitute academic misconduct, how to avoid them and the UW policies for dealing with misconduct, please visit <http://students.wisc.edu/doso/students.html>.

Special Accommodations

The policy of the Board of Regents of the UW System is to ensure that no qualified person shall, solely by reason of disability, be denied access to, participation in, or the benefits of, any program or activity operated in the UW System. Each qualified person shall receive reasonable accommodations needed to ensure access to educational opportunities, programs and activities in the most integrated setting appropriate. If you have a disability and would like to make special arrangements for receiving class materials or completing assignments, please let me know and I will work with you and the McBurney Center, if appropriate, to develop an alternative for you.

Late Work Policy

Late Problem sets will not be accepted, except for certain unusual, extremely good reasons. If you know that you won't be able to hand in an assignment, please contact me asap about it.

Class Etiquette

The use of cell phones will not be allowed in this class. This means no texting, tweeting, facebooking, instagramming, receiving a telegraph, sending smoke signals, etc. Laptops may be used in lecture as long as they are used for note taking purposes. Using laptops for other purposes not only negatively impacts your own ability to learn, but it distracts your fellow classmates. I reserve the right to modify the laptop policy if it is being abused. Also, see here: <http://tinyurl.com/laptopsarebad>. No electronic devices of any sort will be allowed in discussion section.

Course Calendar and other miscellaneous remarks

You will find the course calendar on the next page.

You will notice a column for both “assigned readings” and for “suggestions.” These suggestions are truly optional, and mainly consist of short videos of relevance to the topic of that day or week. I have them on the syllabus for your benefit, but, I emphasize, they are optional. Your grade is unlikely to suffer if you choose to ignore them. Some of the videos might also be helpful before exams for short, accessible recaps of some of our course content.

Note: The below schedule is tentative, and subject to change. I will inform the class of any changes in lecture *and* by posting an announcement on learn@UW.

Date	Content	HW Due	Assigned Reading	Suggestions
September 6 th	Intro			
September 8 th	Charitability and Argument Assessment			WiPhi: Video 1
September 11 th	Necessary & Sufficient Conditions			WiPhi: Video 2 , Video 3
September 13 th	Arguments: Validity and Soundness		Hacking , pp. 1-7	WiPhi: Video 4 , Video 5
September 15 th	Reconstructing Arguments			WiPhi: Video 6
September 18 th	Evaluating Arguments	PS1		WiPhi: Video 7
September 20 th	Rhetoric in Communication		Moore & Parker , 135-145, 150-152	
September 22 nd	Rhetoric in Communication			
September 25 th	Ambiguity in Communication & Associated Fallacies	PS2	Moore & Parker , 64-73	WiPhi: Video 8 , Video 9
September 27 th	Informal Fallacies		Moore & Parker , 176-190	WiPhi: Video 10 , Video 11
September 29 th	Informal Fallacies		yourlogicalfallacyis.com	WiPhi: Video 12 , Video 13
October 2 nd	Media & Credibility	PS3	Moore & Parker , 96-111, 115	
October 4 th	Review Session			
October 6 th	Exam 1			
October 9 th	Inductive Strength & Counting			WiPhi: Video 14
October 11 th	Unconditional Probability		Hacking , pp. 37-45	
October 13 th	Expected Value		Hacking , pp. 79-91	
October 16 th	Expected Value	PS4	Salmon , pp. 232-241	Crash Course: Pascal's Wager
October 18 th	Conditional Probability		Hacking , pp. 47-56	
October 20 th	Bayes' Theorem and Bayesianism		Sober , pp. 8-19	WiPhi: Video 15
October 23 rd	Likelihoodism	PS5	Sober , pp. 23-35	
October 25 th	Tools in Action: God and the Design Argument		Sober , pp. 109-128, 139-147	Crash Course: The Design Argument

October 27 th	Tools in Action: God and the Argument from Evil		Sober , pp. 164-167, 184-188	Crash Course: The Problem of Evil
October 30 th	TBD			
November 1 st	Review Session			
November 3 rd	Exam 2			
November 6 th	Generalizing from Samples		Salmon , pp. 144-153	
November 8 th	Generalizing from Samples			
November 10 th	Forming Causal Hypotheses		Baronett , pp. 602-611	Wiphi: Video 16
November 13 th	Causal Hypotheses & Alternative Explanations	PS6	Moore & Parker , 351-355	Wiphi: Video 17
November 15 th	Confirming Causal Hypotheses: Randomized Control Studies		Moore & Parker , 363-367	
November 17 th	Confirming Causal Hypotheses: Confidence Levels and Error Margins			
November 20 th	Confirming Causal Hypotheses: Prospective and Observational Studies	PS7		
November 22 nd	Revisiting Media & Credibility			
November 24 th	Thanksgiving			
November 27 th	Arguments from Analogy		Baronett , pp. 488 - 498	
November 29 th	Arguments from Analogy			
December 1 st	Tools in Action: The moral status of non-human animals		Norcross , "Puppies, Pigs and People"	
December 4 th	Tools in Action: The moral status of non-human animals	PS8		
December 6 th	Tools in Action: The moral status of distant strangers		Singer , "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"	
December 8 th	Tools in Action: The moral status of distant strangers			
December 11 th	Lessons from the class: Wrap-up	PS9		
December 13 th	Final Exam Review			
FINAL EXAM – 12/20 – 7:45AM-9:45AM				