

**Critical Thinking, Communication,
and Public Policy**
PPL 212, Section 1
Fall 2019
M/W/F 10:00–10:50 am
Lott Institute, Room 113

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Office Hours: M/W 9:00am–10:00am,
2:00pm–3:00pm (or by appt.)

1. COURSE OVERVIEW*

1.1 Description:

We all spend a significant amount of time thinking about issues and policies that are important to us. Few of us, however, spend time thinking about *how to think* about those things. If we do not think critically and rationally about policy issues, we may not be creating or supporting the best policies for ourselves or for society, nor can we effectively argue for those policies. Yet the best arguments will fail if they are not communicated well. And in a society that seems increasingly polarized and uncivil, even the best arguments can go unappreciated. So, in addition to helping students improve their skills in thinking critically, this course is designed to help students improve their skills in reading, writing, and communicating civilly through written work and through individual presentations.

Students will learn the nature of arguments, the nature of deductive and inductive reasoning, common reasoning errors and how to avoid them, and some keys of good communication and public speaking. Students will also learn to apply their critical thinking skills in analyzing, criticizing, and strengthening arguments pertaining to contemporary issues in public policy.

1.2 Course Objectives and Student Learning Outcomes:

This course is designed to:

- Improve students' abilities in reading, identifying, and evaluating public policy issues and the arguments on which they rely
- Introduce students to various kinds of evidence for claims and improve students' abilities to assess and employ evidence well to establish their conclusions
- Improve students' abilities to assess media messages, especially as they pertain to politics and public policy
- Develop or improve students' skills in effective communication, including expository and persuasive writing skills and giving persuasive oral presentations for multiple purposes
- Help students understand how to civilly provide constructive criticism

By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- Identify and diagram arguments and classify argument types
- Evaluate claims and support their evaluation with evidence or a counterexample
- Analyze and evaluate arguments to determine whether they are strong, valid, sound, or cogent
- Infer and critique implicit premises and assumptions in arguments
- Create, develop, and defend their own arguments for novel claims regarding public policy
- Charitably interpret and critique the claims and arguments of others
- Identify heuristics and reasoning errors and explain when and why they are problematic
- Communicate more effectively and confidently
- Synthesize the skills above to create persuasive presentations

*Except for changes that substantially affect implementation of grading, this syllabus is a guide for the course and is subject to change with advanced notice. **Students should read the entire syllabus carefully.** It aims to cover every question students might have about course policies, procedures, and requirements.

2. REQUIRED TEXTS

- Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. 2018. *Think Again: How to Reason and Argue*. New York: Oxford UP. (ISBN: 978-0190627126). [\$11.07 new on Amazon]
- Daniel Kahneman. 2011. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. (ISBN: 978-0374275631). [\$7.20 new on Amazon]
- Additional readings will be posted to the Course Library section of Blackboard.

3. COURSE REQUIREMENTS

3.1 Attendance and Participation: Students are expected to attend all class meetings (unless the absence is excused according to official University policy [see 6.1]). Attendance is not officially a part of the final grade in that students will not receive any points for attending class. Instead, they will lose points from their final grade if too many classes are missed.

Participation is calculated as part of the final grade, and it is a function of two factors: (1) reading class materials and (2) actively participating in classroom discussion and activities. Active participation involves answering and asking questions, engaging in group discussion, filling out peer presentation evaluation sheets, etc. Students who attend every class but never speak or participate will receive a 0 for participation. Students must make a meaningful contribution through their vocal participation in at least 25 class sessions for full participation points. A meaningful contribution is one that shows reflective critical thought or answers a question that has been posed to the class. Although posting on the discussion forum or coming to office hours to discuss an issue does not officially count toward participation, I will take into consideration whether students have done this in determining the final participation grade if a student is near the border.

If it is apparent that students are not completing the readings, I will give pop quizzes. Passing the quiz will not raise your participation grade. Failing the quiz will result in a 5% reduction of the participation grade, and it is possible to earn a negative grade for your participation grade.

3.2 Assignments: At various times throughout the course, students will be given an assignment to be completed outside of class. The assignment will involve practicing applying the concepts discussed in the readings and in class. *There will be a total of 6 assignments, but only your best 5 will count toward your final grade.* While the assignments are designed to be brief and to isolate and test only a few key skills, I strongly advise students not to wait until the last minute to complete the assignment. *If you find the assignment difficult, please come see me in office hours (or make an appointment) before the assignment is due in order to review the concept.* These assignments are *not* meant to be busywork, but are designed to ensure that students are genuinely learning. Regular practice reinforces learning in ways that reading, listening, and participating in class cannot. Additionally, these assignments will also sometimes feature questions that are similar to those found on the exams. Treat these assignments as low-stakes practice for the exams. *If you receive a low grade on an assignment, you should arrange to discuss the assignment with me as soon as possible to ensure you are prepared for the exam.*

Students are encouraged to attempt to complete assignments on their own, but because group learning can be effective, it is permitted. Group work is only effective when all members are actively thinking and participating, however, so *if students work in groups on assignments, they must adhere to these rules: (i) Each student must turn in their own assignments in their own words, showing their own work. Do not simply copy another student's work. (ii) If an example is needed, produce your own example. (iii) Students must put the names of any other students with whom they work on their assignment.* This will explain similarities in work and also let me verify that each student is doing their own work. **Students who fail to follow these rules may be penalized or face charges of plagiarism (see 5.1).**

3.3 Essays: Students are required to write two short essays for the course, to be turned in at the same time. One essay will offer an argument for some position on an issue in public policy. The second essay will be an argument for an incompatible position on that same issue. Each essay should be 600-700 words. At the end of each essay, students must provide a diagram of each argument offered in the essay, which should encourage students to reflect on the structure of their arguments. Essays should be double-spaced, with 12-point Times New Roman font and 1-inch margins on all sides. Further details about the assignment will be provided in class. Students will choose one of the two arguments as the foundation of their persuasive presentation. Students are encouraged to meet with me in office hours before submitting their essays to discuss the topic of their essays and to ensure that their theses and arguments are clear. The essay grading rubric (available on Blackboard) indicates how the essays will be evaluated.

Remember that I do not tolerate plagiarism and will punish any plagiarism to the fullest extent. See 5.1 for further information regarding plagiarism. Students must submit an electronic copy of their essays (in .doc, .docx, or .pdf format) to SafeAssign via Blackboard by the beginning of class on the day the essays are due. *Failure to submit an electronic copy in one of these formats by the deadline will result in a late penalty.*

3.4 Persuasive Presentation: Each student will make one short persuasive presentation, which will be a prepared speech. The persuasive presentation will be one of the student's essays. Each prepared presentation should last approximately 4-5 minutes (you will be cut off after 5 minutes). When a student presents, the rest of the class will fill out brief evaluation sheets indicating both strengths of the presentation as well as ways for the presenter to improve in the future. After looking over these sheets myself, I will share the student evaluations with the presenter so that they can improve.

Blocks of time are set aside for presentations in the course schedule (see 7). Presentations will be made following a schedule that I put together via random selection. A special discussion forum is set up on Blackboard for students to trade days if they prefer a different slot than the one they are randomly assigned. More details on these presentations will be provided in class. The presentation grading rubric (available on Blackboard) indicates how presentations will be evaluated. See 6.1 to learn about the penalties for not attending class on a day the student is scheduled to present.

3.5 Debate: The course will culminate in student debates. There will be two debates during each class period of debate week. As a class, we will come up with a list of issues for debates. Students will be randomly assigned an issue at least a week in advance so that they have time to research and prepare, but they will not know which side they must argue for in class. This means that students must be prepared to argue either side. During class, I will randomly draw an issue, then randomly designate which position a student will argue. Students will have a few moments to gather their thoughts and prepare their argument, and then students will each present their arguments and rebuttals. The class will vote on which student's argument was more persuasive. More details about debates will be given in class. The debate grading rubric (available on Blackboard) indicates how debates will be evaluated. See 6.1 to learn about the penalties for not attending class on a day the student is scheduled to debate.

3.6 Exams: There will be two exams. Exams will test students on the details of the course material, the application of key concepts, and critical analysis of arguments. The first exam will cover material up through the first half of the course, and the second exam will cover material from the *entire* course. Further details about the exams will be given in class.

4. GRADING POLICIES

4.1 Grade Distribution: Participation, assignments, the essays, the presentation, the debate, and the exams will contribute to your final grade in the following way:

Participation:	8%
Assignments:	10%
Essays:	15% (7.5% each)
Presentation:	12%
Debate:	15%
Midterm:	15%
Final:	25%

4.2 Final Grading Scale:

A	93-100	B+	87-89	C+	77-79	D+	67-69
A-	90-92	B	83-86	C	73-76	D	63-66
		B-	80-82	C-	70-72	D-	60-62
						F	0-59

4.3 Late or Missed Work: Work handed in late without a legitimate excuse will be penalized a full letter grade for each day late, including weekends. Late work will be accepted up to three days after the due date. *After three days, work will not be accepted and will receive an automatic 0.* Presentations and debates may not be made up unless there is an emergency which renders a student unable to attend class on the day they are scheduled to present (see 6.1). Exams may not be made up unless the absence is excused. **If you need special accommodations regarding the day and time of the exam, please see me as early as possible.**

5. UNIVERSITY POLICIES

5.1 Academic Misconduct and Plagiarism: Students are expected to uphold the University of Mississippi's standards for academic honesty. For a description of various kinds of academic misconduct and the disciplinary ramifications involved, refer to the University of Mississippi's standards of academic misconduct. A PDF is available on Blackboard, and information can also be found on the University of Mississippi website at: <http://catalog.olemiss.edu/academics/regulations/conduct>. In addition, students can refer to the university's *M Book* for answers to any questions about academic honesty. **I take academic dishonesty very seriously. If students have questions about what plagiarism is or how to avoid it, they should see me as soon as possible for clarification and watch the following video:** http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/general_library/instruction/resources/plagiarism_ac_honest/plagiarism_academic_honesty.html. **Ignorance of what plagiarism is will not excuse students from penalties** for violations of the Student Academic Conduct and Discipline Policy, which can be severe and may result in expulsion.

5.2 Disability Access and Inclusion: The University of Mississippi is committed to the creation of inclusive learning environments for all students. If there are aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in barriers to your full inclusion and participation, or to accurate assessment of your achievement, please contact the course instructor as soon as possible. Barriers may include, but are not necessarily limited to, timed exams and in-class assignments, difficulty with the acquisition of lecture content, inaccessible web content, and the use of non-captioned or non-transcribed video and audio files. If you are approved through SDS, you must log in to your Rebel Access portal

at <https://sds.olemiss.edu> to request approved accommodations. If you are NOT approved through SDS, you must contact Student Disability Services at 662-915-7128 so the office can: 1. determine your eligibility for accommodations, 2. disseminate to your instructors a Faculty Notification Letter, 3. facilitate the removal of barriers, and 4. ensure you have equal access to the same opportunities for success that are available to all students.

6. CLASSROOM POLICIES

6.1 Attendance: Attendance verification during the first two weeks of class is required by the University of Mississippi. Students must attend class at least once during this two-week period to ensure that they are not dropped from the course and to avoid any adjustments to financial aid. For more information on this policy, see <http://olemiss.edu/gotoclass>. Attendance verification will be submitted on Sept. 4, 2019.

I will take attendance at the beginning of every class meeting. This is to encourage students to come to class meetings, as students who attend class and actively participate are more likely to be successful in the course. Students are expected to know any material discussed in class, even if that material was not in the readings. Additionally, this course depends upon student participation, which requires attendance. *Students may miss up to four class meetings without penalty on days in which they are not required to give a presentation, turn in an assignment, or take a test. **After the fourth unexcused absence, the student's final grade will be lowered by 2% for each absence.***

In special circumstances, students may miss more than four class meetings without penalty. This can happen only if there is an extraordinary reason to do so, the student can provide documentation or evidence of this reason (notes from medical emergencies, police reports, etc.), and the student has made arrangements with me prior to the absences insofar as this is possible.

A student who is absent on the date they are signed up to present or debate should arrange to have another student present in their place and alert me of this replacement. If a student misses their presentation or debate without making such arrangements and without a legitimate justifying excuse, they will receive a 0 for the assignment and will have their final grade lowered by 5 percentage points. Students are expected to act professionally and to be respectful of the time of both the instructor and their fellow students.

6.2 Punctuality: Walking in late is distracting and disrespectful. It is also disadvantageous for students, as they may miss important material and the attendance. The same applies to leaving class early. If students have a legitimate reason for being late or leaving early, they should notify me ahead of time, take a seat near the door, and enter or exit the classroom as unobtrusively as possible. ***Students who enter class late or leave early may not be marked as present (see 6.1 above). It is the student's responsibility to verify with me that they have been marked present if they enter class late, and this must be done on the same day (i.e., students cannot claim to have been present in classes weeks earlier). Students who enter class more than 15 minutes late or leave class more than 15 minutes early without a valid excuse will be marked as absent.***

6.3 Electronics: During class, all cell phones should be turned off and put away. When students are in class, they are expected to participate for the entire class period. **If students are seen using a cell phone in class, they will be given one warning. Each further offense will result in a 5% reduction of their final grade.** If special circumstances require the use of such devices, students must clear this with me in advance and provide the relevant documentation.

Many students use laptops to take notes. Although psychological research has suggested that students learn better by hand writing notes rather than typing them (see Blackboard), I do not ban laptops in my classroom. Nevertheless, laptops can be a temptation for distraction in class. If a student is seen using a laptop for any purpose other than taking notes, the student and the class will be given

one warning. **Any further infractions will result in a general no laptop policy. Students who violate the policy will receive a 5% reduction in their final grade.** If special circumstances require the use of a laptop, students must clear this with me and provide the relevant documentation.

6.4 Respect and Civility During Discussion: Some of the topics we discuss in this class are sensitive, and students may have strong opinions regarding policy issues. Students are expected to show their fellow classmates and me the utmost respect. **This means, at the very least, not jeering or interrupting or carrying on private conversations while another person is speaking.** If a student has a response to another student’s comment or question, they should offer it in a calm and respectful manner. We are here to share ideas and learn from each other, and these goals cannot be achieved in a hostile environment. Disrespect will not be tolerated.

To facilitate class discussion, we will use the following conventions: **Students wishing to introduce new information (ask a question, answer a question, make a comment, etc.) who have not yet spoken during that class session should raise their hand. Students wishing to introduce new information who have already spoken during that class session should raise their fist. Students wishing to directly follow up on something another student has said or is saying should raise one finger.**

7. COURSE SCHEDULE (subject to change)

Students are responsible for carefully completing each reading assignment **before** coming to class. If we deviate from the schedule below, it is the student’s responsibility to stay informed of schedule changes, which will be announced in class.

TA=Think Again (page numbers in parentheses), TF&S=Thinking, Fast and Slow, BB=Article or link posted on Blackboard

		Reading	Assignment	
Introduction, Polarization, and Civility				
1	M	8.26	-Introduction -TA, Preface -TA, Introduction	-In class: Argument exercise
2	W	8.28	-TA, Ch. 1 -TA, Ch. 2 -TA, Ch. 3 <i>-Recommended: BB, Dan Crenshaw, “SNL Mocked My Appearance....”</i> <i>-Recommended: BB, Carol Dweck, “Beliefs That Make Smart People Dumb”</i>	
The Value of Arguments				
3	F	8.30	-TA, Ch. 4 -BB, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “Reach Out, Listen, Be Patient. Good Arguments Can Stop Extremism”	
NO CLASS: LABOR DAY (9.2)				
We’re Not as Rational as We Think				
4	W	9.4	-TA, Ch. 5 (67-69) -TF&S, Ch. 1 -TF&S, Ch. 2	-Assignment 1 due

- TF&S, Ch. 8
- TF&S, Ch. 9
- 5 F 9.6 -TF&S, Ch. 12
- TF&S, Ch. 13
- TF&S, Ch. 34
- TA, Ch. 5 (69-73)

Identifying Arguments

- 6 M 9.9 -TA, Ch. 6

-In class: Identifying arguments, conclusions and premises activity

Rhetoric and Communication

- 7 W 9.11 -TA, Ch. 7
- BB, Diestler, Excerpts from *Becoming a Critical Thinker* (pp. 275-278, 280-285, 287)
- 8 F 9.13 -BB, Diestler, Excerpts from *Becoming a Critical Thinker* (pp. 291-303)

Deductive Arguments

- 9 M 9.16 -TA, Ch. 8 (117-122)
- 10 W 9.18 -TA, Ch. 8 (122-126)
- 11 F 9.20 NO CLASS**
- 12 M 9.23 -TA, Ch. 8 (122-126) (no new reading)

Diagramming and Evaluating Arguments

- 13 W 9.25 -TA, Ch. 8 (126-141) -Assignment 2 due
- 14 F 9.27 -BB, Handout on experts -In class: Evaluating websites activity
- BB, Handout on website credibility
- 15 M 9.30 -TA, Ch. 8 (126-141) (no new reading) -Assignment 3 due
- In class: Discuss Assignment 3
- 16 W 10.2 -TA, Ch. 11 (200-204)
- BB, Sinnott-Armstrong and Fogelin, Excerpt from *Understanding Arguments* (pp. 333-335)
- 17 F 10.4 -Review
- 18 M 10.7 -Midterm

Inductive Arguments

- 19 W 10.9 -TA, Ch. 9 (up to p. 160)
- 20 F 10.11 -TF&S, Ch. 10
- 21 M 10.14 -TA, Ch. 9 (160-end)
- T 10.15

-Essays due by midnight

Interlude: Public Speaking

22 W 10.16 -BB, Diestler, Excerpts from *Becoming a Critical Thinker*
(pp. 444-463)

Inductive Arguments (Again)

23 F 10.18 -BB, Chabris and Simons, Excerpt from *The Invisible Gorilla*, Ch. 5 (pp. 154-176)

-BB, Sinnott-Armstrong and Fogelin, Excerpt from
Understanding Arguments (pp. 234-237)

24 M 10.21 -BB, Salmon, Excerpt from *Introduction to Logic and Critical Thinking* (pp. 122-126)

25 W 10.23 -TF&S, Ch. 17

26 F 10.25 -BB, Diestler, Excerpts from *Becoming a Critical Thinker*
(pp. 201-203, 226-228)

27 M 10.28 -TF&S, Ch. 30 (pp. 328-331)
-BB, Gigerenzer, Excerpt from *Risk Savvy* (pp. 18-19, 161-173)

-Assignment 4 due

Persuasive Presentations

28 W 10.30 -No reading

29 F 11.1 -No reading

30 M 11.4 -No reading

-Assignment 5 due

31 W 11.6 -No reading

Responding Properly to Others' Arguments

32 F 11.8 -TA, Ch. 10

33 M 11.11 -TA, Ch. 11 (204-end)
-TA, Conclusion

Debates

34 W 11.13 -Debates

35 F 11.15 NO CLASS

36 M 11.18 -Debates

37 W 11.20 -Debates

38 F 11.22 -Debates

NO CLASS: THANKSGIVING BREAK (11.23-12.1)

39 M 12.2 -Debates

-Assignment 6 due

40 W 12.4 -No reading, catch-up and discussion

-In class: Write arguments

41 F 12.6 -Review

FINAL EXAM: Friday, Dec. 13 at 8:00am in Lott 113.