

AMS 2010: Civil Discourse and the American Political Order

I. General Information

Class Meetings

- Spring 2026
- CSE 453
- 100% In-Person, no GTAs, 35 residential students
- MWF Period 6 (12:50 PM–1:40 PM)
- 3 Credits

Instructor

- Brandon Warmke
- CSE 476
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- Phone: 352-273-3040
- Office hours: MWF 10-11:30am and by appointment

Course Description

What is civil discourse? And does the American political order require civil discourse properly to function? This course takes up these questions. In the process, it explores the historical and philosophical roots of equality, toleration and free speech, requisites of civil discourse. Students will also consider the role of free speech and civil discourse, not only in the context of American civic life but within the context of American university life. To do this, students will survey the basic principles of American democracy and how they are applied in our republican form of government, including by developing an understanding of the U.S. Constitution; by developing a knowledge of the nation's founding documents and how they have shaped the nature and functions of our institutions of self-governance; and by developing an understanding of landmark Supreme Court cases and their impact on law and society, particularly as they relate to freedom of expression. Finally, students will apply the lessons they have learned to particular case studies. The course aims to enable students to engage in civil debates with multiple points of view and to master the ability to synthesize information that informs civic decision-making.

General Education Credit

- [Humanities](#) (H)
- [Writing Requirement](#) (WR) 2000 words

This course accomplishes the [General Education](#) objectives of the subject areas listed above. A minimum grade of C is required for General Education credit. Courses intended to satisfy General Education requirements cannot be taken S-U.

The [Writing Requirement](#) (WR) ensures students both maintain their fluency in writing and use writing as a tool to facilitate learning.

Course grades have two components. To receive writing requirement credit, a student must receive a grade of C or higher and a satisfactory completion of the writing component of the course.

Required Readings and Works

1. Required readings will be posted as PDFs to Canvas.
2. The writing manual for this course is: *The Economist Style Guide*, 11th edn. (2015). ISBN: 978-1-61039-575-5.
3. Materials and Supplies Fees: N/A.

Course Objectives

- Identify, describe, and explain the history and underlying theories of civil discourse.
 - Identify, describe, and explain elements of the U.S. Constitution, and the founding documents.
 - Identify, describe, and explain landmark Supreme Court cases and their impact on law and society.
 - Evaluate the extent to which the founding documents have shaped the nature and functions of our institutions of self-governance.
 - Analyze primary documents, situate them in historical and literary context, and develop critical interpretations of their significance to the emergence of modern conceptions and practice of civil discourse.
 - Analyze key elements, biases and influences that shape the theory and practice of civil discourse generally and in America more specifically.
 - Develop and articulate in writing clear and effective responses to central questions about civil discourse from multiple perspectives.
 - Communicate orally and in writing clearly and effectively the significance of the development of modern conceptions of civil discourse in our society.

II. Graded Work

Description of Graded Work

1. Exam 1: 33% of final grade
 - a. 25 questions: Multiple choice, true/false, short essay
 - b. Date: Feb. 25
2. Exam 2: 33% of final grade
 - a. 25 questions: Multiple choice, true/false, short essay
 - b. Date: April 30
3. Essay: 33% of final grade
 - a. In class written reflection on one reading from the course. Must write a thesis and defend it. Details to be discussed throughout the semester.
4. Free: 1%

III. Weekly Schedule

Week 1

- 1/12 Introduction and Syllabus
- 1/14 The importance of speech: “The First Amendment”
- 1/16. What is Civility? Teresa Bejan, “Is Civility a Sham?” TED Conferences, October 2018,
https://www.ted.com/talks/teresa_bejan_is_civility_a_sham

Week 2: Freedom and Self-governance

- 1/19 NO CLASS
- 1/21 Aristotle, *Politics*, Book I. Ch 1–2 and 8-9, pp. 35–37, 43–48.
- 1/23 *Declaration of Independence*: pp. 115–118.

Week 3: The Enlightenment Inheritance

- 1/26 John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, pp. 81-90
- 1/28 Immanuel Kant, ‘What is Enlightenment?’, pp. 1-7
- 1/30 Bernard Mandeville, ‘The Fable of the Bees’, pp. 242-254

Week 4: The Constitution

- 2/2 *The Constitution of the United States*
- 2/4 *The Federalist 1*
- 2/6 *The Federalist 9-10*

Week 5: Federalism and The Separation of Powers

- 2/9 *Federalist* 47–48, 51, pp. 239–249, 256–260.
- 2/11 *Brutus* 1, October 18, 1787 (5 pages total)
- 2/13 Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, pp. 3–10, 16–23.

Week 6-8: Mill and His Critics on Freedom of Expression

- 2/16 Chapter 1: “Introductory,” *On Liberty*
- 2/18 cont’d.
- 2/20 Chapter 2: “Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion,” *On Liberty*
- 2/23 Mill, cont’d
- 2/25 Mill, cont’d
- 2/27 NO CLASS – ARIZONA CONFERENCE

- 3/2 James Fitzjames Stephen, “On the Liberty of Thought and Discussion” *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*
- 3/4 cont’d
- 3/6 cont’d and EXAM 1 Review

Week 9: Exam and Epistemic Humility

- 3/9 EXAM 1
- 3/11 Hrishikesh Joshi, “What Are the Chances You’re Right About Everything?”
- 3/13 cont’d

3/16-3/20 – SPRING BREAK

Week 10-11: Applied Issues

- 3/23 Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke, “Moral Grandstanding as a Threat to Free Expression”
- 3/25 cont’d
- 3/27 Daniel Jacobson, “Why Freedom of Speech Includes Hate Speech”
- 3/30 cont’d
- 4/1 Michael Oakeshott, “The Purpose of a University”
- 4/3 *University of Chicago, Report on the Committee on Free Expression*

Week 12: Legal Cases

- 4/6 *Dennis v. United States* (1951)
 4/8 *New York Times v. Sullivan* (1964)
 4/10 *Brandenburg v. Ohio* (1969)

Week 13: Case Study: Free Speech and Pornography

- 4/13 *Miller v. California* (1973)
 4/15 Rae Langton, "Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts"
 4/17 cont'd

Week 14

- 4/20 Daniel Jacobson, "Freedom of Speech Acts? A response to Langton"
 4/22 IN CLASS ESSAY
 4/24 NO CLASS – READING DAY

Final Exam: Thursday, April 30, 10am-12pm

IV. Grading Scale and Rubrics

Grading Scale

For information on UF's grading policies for assigning grade points, see [here](#).

A	94 – 100%		C	74 – 76%
A–	90 – 93%		C–	70 – 73%
B+	87 – 89%		D+	67 – 69%
B	84 – 86%		D	64 – 66%
B–	80 – 83%		D–	60 – 63%
C+	77 – 79%		E	<60

Grading Rubrics

Examination Rubric: Essays and Short Answers

Completeness	Analysis	Evidence	Writing
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A (90-100%)	Shows a thorough understanding of the question. Addresses all aspects of the question completely.	Analyses, evaluates, compares and/or contrasts issues and events with depth.	Incorporates pertinent and detailed information from both class discussions and assigned readings.	Presents all information clearly and concisely, in an organized manner.
B (80-89%)	Presents a general understanding of the question. Completely addresses most aspects of the question or address all aspects incompletely.	Analyses or evaluates issues and events, but not in any depth.	Includes relevant facts, examples and details but does not support all aspects of the task evenly.	Presents information fairly and evenly and may have minor organization problems.
C (70-79%)	Shows a limited understanding of the question. Does not address most aspects of the question.	Lacks analysis or evaluation of the issues and events beyond stating accurate, relevant facts.	Includes relevant facts, examples and details, but omits concrete examples, includes inaccurate information and/or does not support all aspects of the task.	Lacks focus, somewhat interfering with comprehension.
D (60-69%)	Fails fully to answer the specific central question.	Lacks analysis or evaluation of the issues and events beyond stating vague, irrelevant, and/or inaccurate facts.	Does not incorporate information from pertinent class discussion and/or assigned readings.	Organizational problems prevent comprehension.
E (<60%)	Does not answer the specific central question.	Lacks analysis or evaluation of the issues and events.	Does not adduce any evidence.	Incomprehensible organization and prose.

Writing Rubric

	Thesis and Argumentation	Use of Sources	Organization	Grammar, mechanics and style
A (90-100%)	Thesis is clear, specific, and presents a thoughtful, critical, engaging, and creative interpretation. Argument fully supports the thesis both logically and thoroughly.	Primary (and secondary texts, if required) are well incorporated, utilized, and contextualized throughout.	Clear organization. Introduction provides adequate background information and ends with a thesis. Details are in logical order. Conclusion is strong and states the point of the paper.	No errors.
B (80-89%)	Thesis is clear and specific, but not as critical or original. Shows insight and attention to the text under consideration. May have gaps in argument's logic.	Primary (and secondary texts, if required) are incorporated but not contextualized significantly.	Clear organization. Introduction clearly states thesis, but does not provide as much background information. Details are in logical order, but may be more difficult to follow. Conclusion is recognizable and ties up almost all loose ends.	A few errors.

C (70-79%)	Thesis is present but not clear or specific, demonstrating a lack of critical engagement to the text. Argument is weak, missing important details or making logical leaps with little support.	Primary (and secondary texts, if required) are mostly incorporated but are not properly contextualized.	Significant lapses in organization. Introduction states thesis but does not adequately provide background information. Some details not in logical or expected order that results in a distracting read. Conclusion is recognizable but does not tie up all loose ends.	Some errors.
D (60-69%)	Thesis is vague and/or confused. Demonstrates a failure to understand the text. Argument lacks any logical flow and does not utilize any source material.	Primary and/or secondary texts are almost wholly absent.	Poor, hard-to-follow organization. There is no clear introduction of the main topic or thesis. There is no clear conclusion, and the paper just ends. Little or no employment of logical body paragraphs.	Many errors.
E (<60%)	There is neither a thesis nor any argument.	Primary and/or secondary texts are wholly absent.	The paper is wholly disorganized, lacking an introduction, conclusion or any logical coherence.	Scores of errors.

IV. Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)

At the end of this course, students will be expected to have achieved the [General Education student learning outcomes](#) for Humanities (H).

Humanities (H) Humanities courses must afford students the ability to think critically through the mastering of subjects concerned with human culture, especially literature, history, art, music, and philosophy, and must include selections from the Western canon.

Humanities courses provide instruction in the history, key themes, principles, terminology, and theory or methodologies used within a humanities discipline or the humanities in general. Students will learn to identify and to analyze the key elements, biases and influences that shape thought. These courses emphasize clear and effective analysis and approach issues and problems from multiple perspectives.

Content: *Identify, describe and explain the history, underlying theory and methodologies used.* Assessments: Reading quizzes, midterm exam, final exam, and an analytical essay.

- Identify, describe, and explain the history and underlying theories of civil discourse **(H)**. **Assessments:** reading quizzes, midterm exam, final exam.
- Identify, describe, and explain elements of the U.S. Constitution, and the founding documents **(H)**. **Assessments:** Reading quizzes, exams, and paper.
- Identify, describe, and explain landmark Supreme Court cases and their impact on law and society **(H)**. **Assessments:** Reading quizzes, exams.

Critical Thinking: *Identify and analyze key elements, biases and influences that shape thought within the subject area. Approach issues and problems within the discipline from multiple perspectives.*

- Evaluate the extent to which the founding documents have shaped the nature and functions of our institutions of self-governance **(H)**. **Assessments:** midterm exam, final exam, paper.
- Analyze primary documents, situate them in historical and literary context, and develop critical interpretations of their significance to the emergence of modern conceptions and practice of civil discourse **(H)**. **Assessments:** paper.
- Analyze key elements, biases and influences that shape the theory and practice of civil discourse generally and in America more specifically **(H)**. **Assessments:** exams, paper.

Communication: *Communicate knowledge, thoughts and reasoning clearly and effectively.*

- Develop and articulate in writing clear and effective responses to central questions about civil discourse from multiple perspectives **(H)**. **Assessments:** longer paper.
- Communicate orally and in writing clearly and effectively the significance of the development of modern conceptions of civil discourse in our society **(H)**. **Assessments:** class discussion, paper.

V. Required Policies

Academic Policies

All academic policies in this course are consistent with university policies, which can be found here:

<https://go.ufl.edu/syllabuspolices>