

[Example Syllabus] English 200: Conspiracies and Cults

ENGL 200 is a topics course that develops information literacy and critical thinking skills needed to write a well-reasoned research paper. Satisfies Core Information Literacy (CILT) and Core Critical Thinking (CCTH) requirements. Students must satisfy Core First Year Writing (CFYW) prior to taking this course.

About this Class

Because you were raised in the internet age (commonly referred to as the age of “misinformation”), you are probably already quite familiar with deceptive packaging used to “sell” us information. We all feel pretty confident we can separate good products from bad. But it’s worth taking a moment to ponder: why is deceptive information so broadly appealing, and so often successful in hooking audiences?

In this class, we learn concepts from rhetorical theory to explore why conspiracy theories have managed to gain such traction with audiences. First, we identify characteristics of “weak” critical reasoning that typify conspiratorial and cultish thinking. We will get technical and name and identify common trends we see: for example, the technique of overabundant, seemingly “authoritative” evidence, which actually has little or no connection to a knowledge claim; language that constructs “in-group” versus “out-group” thinking; and logical fallacies that seem tailor-made to exploit our feelings of fear, uncertainty, and desire to belong.

Equipped with foundational concepts like these, students will pick their own case study of conspiratorial or cultish thinking to research on their own. However, because discounting any argument or “out-group” as a “conspiracy” or a “cult” is a common tactic these days, students will be asked to choose a historical or contemporary example already recognized by scholarly researchers. Students will conduct independent research by finding artifacts, secondary scholarly research articles, and other sources (CILT LO1 and CILT LO3) to produce a case study that proposes and supports an original observation (CCTH) about conspiratorial or cultish rhetoric.

Learning Outcomes

- Apply concepts from rhetorical and argument theory to critically analyze and interpret arguments, texts, and case studies
- Compose research-based arguments that demonstrate rhetorical awareness of purpose, audience, and academic discourse conventions
- (CCTH) Develop and support a credible thesis and conclusion using techniques of analysis in a manner appropriate to an academic discipline.
- (CILT LO1) Use search strategies to identify and access credible and relevant sources of information and use that knowledge for a particular purpose.

- (CILT LO2) Critically evaluate various sources of information by asking strategic questions about origins, context, and suitability for use.
- (CILT LO3) Use sources of information effectively and ethically.

Required texts

This class will require the following texts:

- Class Reader: Selected Readings on Conspiratorial and Cultish Thinking
- *Asking the Right Questions: a Guide to Critical Thinking*. Browne, M. Neil. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1990.
- Selected chapters from [*The Informed Writer: Using Sources in the Disciplines*](#) by Charles Bazerman (open access textbook published through the *Writing Across the Curriculum Clearinghouse*)

Formal Assignments

All major assignments must be completed in order to pass this course. Please see the addendum on grading policies for more information.

- Paper 1 (20%): Primary Artifact Analysis: Rhetorical analysis of a conspiracy theory text. Two drafts with revision based on instructor feedback required.
- Paper 2 (10%): Project Proposal: Formal proposal for independent research topic on a selected conspiracy theory or case study of cultish thinking.
- Paper 3 (40%): Research-Based Case Study: Research-based analysis of a selected case study of conspiratorial or cultish thinking, including one rhetorical artifact, two scholarly research articles, and two popular or reference sources. Includes a short annotated bibliography. Two drafts with revision required.
- Portfolio and Final Reflection (10%): In-class reflective essay describing the role of critical thinking in your process of inquiry, citing examples from your own written work.

Informal Work (10%)

Informal writing and research assignments will scaffold skills needed to complete the longer research-based project. Informal assignments will be assigned weekly, and will include reading responses, information literacy exercises, paraphrases and annotations of primary and secondary sources, reflective writing, and a personal research diary.

Participation/Preparation, Attendance, Class Presentation (10%)

Students will receive credit for being prepared for class by completing readings and written assignments, and participating and contributing to class learning, including peer review. Students will also present research, primary artifacts, and tentative findings of an independent research project to class.

Peer Review (Part of Formal Assignment and Participation grade)

You must be present on the days we conduct peer review in order to receive credit. You must not be late to class (after a few minutes, we assign partners). If you have a peer review date that you cannot attend due to an approved reason, let me know *at least several*

days ahead of time and I may be able to make accommodations. Otherwise, there are no exceptions to this policy.

Revision (Part of Formal Assignment grade)

Revision will be mandatory for selected papers. Revised drafts must highlight new content in red.

Final Exam: Final Reflection and Portfolio

Students will be asked to gather their initial drafts, revisions, and research diary, select key examples of their work, and write a short reflection about their research and writing process.

Formal Assignments

Paper 1: Analysis of a Rhetorical Artifact

Synthesizing a concept from our class reader and a critical thinking question from *Asking the Right Questions*, analyze a conspiratorial text. Your paper must make an original observation to answer the question: how does this artifact manage to persuade audiences? This assignment allows you to practice analysis and interpretation skills required for your longer independent research project.

Requirements: Minimum 1000 words. MLA format. Second draft with revision based on instructor feedback.

Grading Criteria

The following criteria will be used to grade this paper:

- Application of one critical thinking and/or rhetorical concept from class readings to analyze and interpret a primary text
- A central, original observation that responds to the prompt and is supported by close analysis of the primary text (CCTH)
- Paraphrase and quoting that follows academic conventions considered effective and authoritative in the humanities, as taught in class
- Original observation and essay cohesion that follow conventions for interpretive argument in the humanities, as taught in class

Paper 2: Case Study Proposal

Choose your own case study of a conspiracy theory or cultish thinking. After receiving approval for your topic, conduct preliminary research and write a proposal that describes your project and lists three potential sources. (CILT LO1) Your proposal must follow the three steps of a standard proposal argument:

1. Make a case for your topic's importance, relevance, and suitability for the assignment
2. Identify a **research question** that needs to be more deeply investigated
3. Propose a research agenda you will follow to investigate this question

Requirements: Your initial research question must propose a project of open inquiry, similar to a hypothesis you don't know the answer to. (CCTH) Your proposal must identify three starting sources you will investigate to attempt to answer your research question: one primary text (rhetorical argument or artifact), one peer-reviewed scholarly research article, and one popular or reference text.

A Note on Topic Selection: Because this assignment requires open inquiry into your topic, students will be cautioned against selecting topics that lead them into *motivated reasoning* and *confirmation bias*. For instance, if you select a group you deeply disagree with, and then locate sources that demonstrate conspiratorial thinking, your own assumptions and values may interfere with your ability to perform good artifact analysis. A better research topic will allow you to feel less invested in whether your initial assumptions are confirmed. (CCTH) This paper is not an argument of "classification," in which you argue a group *should be classified* as conspiratorial. Paper topics are restricted to cases where established scholarly research already describes a group's thinking as conspiratorial and your task is to analyze conspiratorial language and persuasion tactics. In step 1 of your proposal, you will make the case that your topic meets this requirement, and is thus *suitable* for the assignment.

Minimum 500 words. Three sample sources as a draft list of references: one primary artifact, one secondary scholarly article, and one popular or reference text. (CILT LO2)

Grading Criteria

The following criteria will be used to evaluate this paper:

- All three components of the proposal argument are present and articulated clearly
- Step 1 makes a case for why the research topic is relevant and suitable for the assignment.
- Step 2 asks a question that can be proven using methods of textual analysis in humanistic inquiry (avoiding causal or other types of arguments that cannot be proven and asking a research question that can lead to interpretive complexity, not just a factual report, or a "yes or no" answer) (CCTH)
- A draft reference list that includes brief annotations for each source. Your annotation should describe each source's purpose and suitability for your project (one primary text/artifact, one secondary scholarly research article, one popular or reference text), and include some description of the container where the information was published and information about the author(s) (CILT LO1)

Paper 3: Case Study Research Project

Conduct an independent research project that explores your research question and produce a new interpretive claim about how conspiratorial or cultish thinking attempts to persuade audiences in your selected case. Your research will result in an extended argument (1500 words) with **a new interpretive claim** that responds to your research question. You will support your new claim with artifact analysis and a synthesis of evidence from other sources.

Part A. Research Diary

Maintain a personal research diary to record your progress across *all* stages of inquiry: project brainstorming, research proposal, identifying and vetting sources, documenting your “research trail,” articulating possible claims, refining, narrowing, and testing interpretations (CCTH), drafting, and revising. You will be given class time to write in this journal, and it will be public (posted in our Canvas discussion board). Your writing can be informal and reflective, so it need not follow academic conventions. But your writing must respond to informal prompts given in class to receive full credit.

Part B. Annotated Bibliography

You will locate six sources in total: **two** primary texts (example argument or artifact), **two** scholarly articles, and **two** popular or reference sources related to your case study. (CILT LO1) For each source, briefly paraphrase the content of each source, describe its container (where it was published and what type of content review it received) (CILT LO2), and explain its relevance to your investigation. Note that your project proposal already required that you locate half of these sources. You can choose to use these same three sources or swap them out with new ones you’ve located during research.

Minimum 150 words of annotation per text. Six sources (two from each source type)

Part C. Formal Paper: Case Study of Conspiratorial or Cultish Rhetoric

Reporting on your research into primary and secondary sources, present a new interpretive claim about what you discovered when you investigated your initial research question about cultish and conspiratorial rhetoric. While your research may have taken you in interesting directions, be sure your paper focus is related to the question: how does cultish or conspiratorial rhetoric attempt to persuade audiences in this case?

Requirements: Note that while your research asked you to identify two primary texts, your final paper can focus on just **one**. Five sources minimum (a minimum of **one** primary text, and **four** supporting sources). Minimum 1500 words. MLA format.

Grading Criteria

The following criteria will be used to evaluate this project:

- The paper proposes an original interpretive claim that responds to the prompt.

- Analysis of primary text(s) provides evidence that supports the interpretive claim (CCTH)
- Synthesis and paraphrase of secondary sources (scholarly and non-scholarly) provide adequate context and support for the new interpretive claim (CILT LO3)
- New interpretive claim is presented with appropriate hedging and qualification necessary for a case study based on limited textual evidence; avoids over-generalization, acknowledges possible alternative interpretations, addresses limitations of the evidence by adequately emphasizing points of uncertainty (CCTH)
- Appropriate use of different types of sources, demonstrating a clear understanding of the limitations of each source when used as evidence to support the project's new interpretive claim (CILT LO2)

(Final Exam): Reflection using Portfolio Examples

Write a 300 word reflective, personal essay describing how one or more concepts from critical thinking informed your research project. In particular, explain how your own thinking evolved as a process of open inquiry: how did you revise or re-adjust your initial questions and early interpretations based on evidence you collected during research? How did you refine and/or complicate your interpretive claim across drafts, or change how you incorporated evidence? (CCTH) Quote from and discuss at least two examples from your own writing. Examples can come from your initial project proposal, your annotated reference list, your research diary, and drafts of your research paper.

Minimum 300 words. Written in-person during finals exam.

Grading Criteria

The following criteria will be used to evaluate this project:

- Essay responds to the prompt by applying one critical thinking term and reflecting on your process of open inquiry.
- Essay effectively presents and discusses two pieces of evidence from the student's writing portfolio.

Class Calendar

Week 1: Welcome to Class!

- In-Class Activities: Introduction to Class; Conspiratorial Thinking; Discussion of "Weak-Sense and Strong-Sense Critical Thinking"
- Reading: Read Chapter 1, *Asking the Right Questions* (ATRQ)
- Writing: Discussion Board Post: Introduce yourself

Week 2: Formal Argument Basics. Vetting Source “Containers.”

- In-Class Activities: Group work with example artifacts; information literacy workshop, “Vetting containers” (CILT LO2)
- Reading: Weill, from *Off the Edge*; Chapters 2-3, ATRQ, “What are the issues and Conclusion?” and “What are the Reasons?”
- Writing: Discussion Board Post: Identify conclusion, reasoning, and evidence of assigned artifact. Investigate the container (where it is published).

Week 3: Traits of Conspiracy Theories: Use (and Abuse) of Evidence.

- In-Class Activities: Formal Paper 1 Prompt Handed Out and Discussed, Rhetorical Fallacies, Uses and Abuses of Evidence (CITL LO3)
- Reading: Cassam, “Bad Thinkers,” ATRQ “How Good is the Evidence?”
- Writing: Discussion Board Post: Analyzing Class Artifact: What Counts as Evidence in *The Case of Chemtrails*

Week 4: Traits of Conspiracy Theories: Value Appeals and Tribalism.

- In-Class Activities: What is a rhetorical warrant? How do warrants reveal in-group value appeals? How to vet sources you find using open internet searches; Locate your primary artifact and one trustworthy popular or reference article. (CILT LO1)
- Reading: Cook, from *The Quiet Damage*, ATRQ “What are the Value Assumptions?”
- Writing: Discussion Board Post: Analyzing Your Selected Artifact

Week 5: Traits of Conspiracy Theories: Deceptive Language. The Genre of the Interpretive Essay.

- In Class Activities: The Genre of the Interpretive Essay in the Humanities; Interpretive theme-building and *Inductive Analysis*; (CCTH) Peer review
- Reading: Kolbert, “What Facts,” ATRQ, “What Words and Phrases are Ambiguous?”
- Writing: Complete Paper 1: Analysis of primary artifact, incorporating context from one popular or reference source (CILT LO3). Peer Review. **Due: Paper 1**

Week 6: Introduction to the Research Project.

- In-Class Activities: Library training session on Information Literacy and Locating Sources in Copley Library; Introduction to Formal Research Project, Paper Prompt and Grading Criteria handed out and discussed; How to read a scholarly article?

- Write and Research: Discussion Board Post: Find a scholarly journal article related to a case study of a cult or conspiratorial thinking ([CILT LO1](#))

Week 7: The Genre of the Research Proposal. Strategies for Annotating and Tracking Research.

- In-Class Activities: What is a proposal argument? The Research Proposal Genre; Locate an example artifact (primary text) and popular or reference sources for your case study ([CILT LO1](#)); The purpose of an annotated bibliography. ([CILT LO2](#)) In-class writing in your research diary.
- Writing and Research: Discussion Board: Draft your Research Proposal

Week 8: Traits of Conspiracy Theories: Deceptive Statistics and Logical Fallacies. Independent Research.

- In-Class Activities: Class Sharing: What's your selected research artifact? Fun with Deceptive Statistics. The Most Common Rhetorical Fallacies in Conspiratorial Thinking. Drafting a Research Question for Open Inquiry in the Humanities ([CCTH](#)). In-class writing in your research diary.
- Reading: *ATRQ*, "Are Any Statistics Deceptive?" "Are There Any Fallacies in the Reasoning?"
- Writing and Research: Draft Annotated Bibliography Entries; **Paper 2: Research Proposal Due**

Week 9: Traits of Conspiracy Theories: Lies of Omission. Independent Research Continued.

- In-Class Activities: Instructor Feedback on Formal Research Proposal; In-class writing in your research diary
- Reading: *ATRQ*, "What Significant Information is Omitted?"; Bazerman, *Writing From Sources in the Disciplines*
- Writing and Research: Locate your second set of research sources: artifact, scholarly source, additional popular or reference source ([CILT LO1](#)); Discussion Board Post: Inductive analysis checkpoint (does your evidence currently suggest a full, partial, or "impossible to know" answer to your research question?) ([CCTH](#))

Week 10: Recognizing Our Own Flaws. Independent Research Continued.

- In-Class Activities: Strategies to synthesize sources; Interpretive knowledge claims in the humanities; Recognizing your own flaws; in-class writing in your research diary. ([CCTH](#))
- Reading: *ATRQ*, "Speed Bumps in Your Critical Thinking"

- Writing and Research: Discussion Board Post: What are the Flaws in Your Evidence, Sources, and Reasoning?; Research Diary Log; Annotated Bibliography Entries

Week 11: Drafting and Peer Review.

- In-Class Activities: Peer Review
- Writing and Research: **75% Peer Review Draft Due, 1:1 Conference Checkpoint**

Week 12: Revision Workshops. Student Presentations.

- In-Class Activities: Instructor feedback provided on first peer review draft; In-Class Revision Workshops; Student Presentations: Share your artifacts and new claim
- Writing and Research: Revise first draft based on feedback from Peer Reviewer, and in-class writing workshops. Finish final draft.

Week 13: Final Paper Due. Student Presentations.

- In-class Activities: Student Presentations: Share your artifacts and new claim In-class writing in your research diary
- Writing and Research: **Due: Final Draft of Final Project**

Week 14: Student Presentations. Preparation for Final.

- In-class Activities: Student Presentations: Share your artifacts and new claim. In-class writing in your research diary
- Writing: Preparing your writing portfolio for the Final Exam

Week 15: Student Presentations. Preparation for Final.

- In-class Activities: Student Presentations: Share your artifacts and new claim. In-class writing in your research diary
- Writing: Preparing your writing portfolio for the final exam

Final Exam

- In-class reflective essay on critical thinking and your writing process, referencing materials from your class portfolio

Other Class Policies

Attendance

Attendance is part of your preparation and participation grade and is mandatory for this class. Students with more than six absences will have **five** points deducted from their participation and preparation grade. After six absences, students are at risk for receiving an F in the class.

Conferences

During revision, I schedule time for student conferences. This will be our time to discuss your progress in class, my feedback on your paper, and any questions you have. I expect students to come prepared. You will be driving the discussion, so be ready to propose what to discuss.

Tardiness

Come on time or early to class. If you are repeatedly late to class, your preparation and participation grade may suffer. Late arrival can disqualify you from peer review.

Late Work

Deadlines are crucial in academic and professional contexts. Project planning and time management are part of the skills you should be developing. Informal, daily assignments prepare you for work we will do together in class, and are often building blocks to practice skills for formal papers. You cannot get credit for very late informal work (for instance, turning in informal work at the same time as the formal project—this defeats the purpose). Major assignments may be reduced by one letter grade per day if late.

That said, I sincerely want you to do well in this course. Your academic success in this course and throughout your college career depends heavily on your personal health and well-being. Stress is a common part of the college experience, and it often can be compounded by unexpected life changes outside the classroom. As discussed in more detail in the “grading policy,” all students may receive a “get out of jail free” card for one assignment. No need to explain the reason—we will negotiate an alternate due date. Just use it when it’s needed.

Email

You need to check your USD email address at least once every weekday to keep up with this class. Generally, I will respond to your emails within 24 hours on weekdays; my response time will vary on weekends.

Personal Electronic Devices

Because this class relies primarily on discussion and not lecture, your engagement is required. Sometimes uses of technology hinder engagement. I expect that you will refrain

from checking email and from logging on to any site that does not pertain to discussions or assignments during class time. Based on student behavior, I may permit cell phones to be present in class. However, when I see that this policy is distracting from mature behavior (in the form of attentiveness and showing me and your classmates respect), I will be forced to modify it.

Confidentiality

I will respect the confidentiality of anything you tell me in class or in my office, with two key exceptions:

1. Anonymized work will be used for class instruction. Past students have reported they find this incredibly helpful, as I am always positive with students, even when offering constructive criticism. Students will know whose work I am discussing. However, if you are uncomfortable with your work being used as an example (even if anonymously), please come talk to me early in the semester.
2. If you tell me anything suggests that you may be in danger, that someone else may be in danger, or that you have been the victim of sexual violence, it is my legal obligation to report this to appropriate people at the university.

Academic Honesty

Originality is the crucial ingredient that makes your writing powerfully “yours.” Submitting someone else’s writing as your own is not just a serious academic crime, it’s downright unethical. If you are panicking about producing your own writing, or confused by an assignment, don’t steal someone else’s words. Come talk to me. I will help you figure out a better solution. I promise to never judge or be impatient with you about your confusion or academic anxiety. I even understand procrastination. However, your part of the deal is to produce YOUR best work with integrity and honesty.

This course assumes all stages of the writing process (brainstorming, planning and organization, drafting, and revision) are performed by students working independently. Academic dishonesty includes any and all of the following activities: purchasing papers or hiring a service to complete them, co-writing a paper where another writer produces text and arguments, reusing pre-existing content not authored by you without proper citation, and/or using generative AI tools (such as ChatGPT).

The USD Academic Integrity Policy can be found at the following URL: http://home.sandiego.edu/~kaufmann/USD_academic_integrity.html

USD Writing Program Statement on AI

The Writing Program recognizes that Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools can be highly useful for a variety of purposes. However, this class is meant to help students develop strong critical thinking, independent research, and writing skills, all of which are vital for student success at

USD. For this reason, unauthorized, inappropriate, and/or unethical use of AI will be treated the same as any other case of academic dishonesty. It is the student's responsibility to understand what constitutes unauthorized, inappropriate, and unethical uses of AI. If students have questions, they are urged to speak with their professor *before* turning in written work.

You will be submitting all work electronically into Canvas. Canvas automatically evaluates papers for the use of AI.

University Resources

USD Writing Center, (619) 260-4581, Learning Commons 203

<https://www.sandiego.edu/cas/centers/writing-center/>

The USD Writing Center, which is free to all USD students, helps students improve their writing. Students may bring work in any stage of completion to the Writing Center, from brainstorming notes to rough drafts to graded essays.

Copley Library, (619) 260-4799

<https://www.sandiego.edu/library/>

Copley Library, located on the west end of the campus, currently houses over 500,000 volumes. Collections include books, journals, reference works, databases, government documents, newspapers and electronic journals in many languages, as well as maps, videos, sound recordings, microforms and rare books.

Disability and Learning Difference Resource Center, (619) 260-4655, Saints Hall 300

<https://www.sandiego.edu/disability/>

The Disability and Learning Difference Resource Center is committed to helping students with disabilities obtain meaningful academic accommodations and support and to help improve access to the many excellent programs and activities offered by the University.

The Counseling Center, (619) 260-4655, Saints Hall 300

<https://www.sandiego.edu/counseling-center/>

The Counseling Center provides confidential consultations, assessment, and psychological/psychiatric treatment to facilitate students' personal growth and address their mental health concerns.

Selections for Class Reader

[Selected Chapters from Book] Weill, Kelly. *Off the Edge: Flat Earthers, Conspiracy Culture, and Why People Will Believe Anything*. Algonquin, 2022.

[Selected Chapters Book] Cook, Jesselyn. *The Quiet Damage: QAnon and the Destruction of the American Family*. Crown, 2024.

[Full article available online] Quassim Cassam, "Bad thinkers." *aeon*. March 13 2015, <https://aeon.co/essays/the-intellectual-character-of-conspiracy-theorists>

[Full article] Kolbert, Elizabeth. "Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds: New Discoveries about the Human Mind Show the Limitations of Reason." *The New Yorker*, 27 Feb. 2017, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/27/why-facts-dont-change-our-minds.

Online Essay Collection, "Shadowland." *The Atlantic* <https://www.theatlantic.com/shadowland/>

Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." <https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/>

[Selected Chapters from Book] Jesse Walker, *The United States of Paranoia; A Conspiracy Theory Reader*

[Selected Chapters from Book] David Aaronovitch, *Voodoo Histories*

[Selected Essays from Collection] Editors Michael W. Austin and Gregory L. Bock, *QAnon, Chaos, and the Cross; Christianity and Conspiracy Theories*