PHI171 Critical Thinking

Instructor: Kevan Edwards (kedwar02@syr.edu)

Teaching Assistant (TA): Emine “Naz” Oktay (enoktay@syr.edu)

Class sessions: Tuesday/Thursday 9:30 - 10:25, Slocum Hall 214.

Discussion sections: Students are also enrolled in one of two sections:

M002: Wednesday 9:30 - 10:25, Hall of Languages 102

M003: Wednesday 10:35 - 11:30, Hall of Languages 115

Office hours: The tentative plan is for the instructor to hold office hours on Wednesday from 11:00am - noon, in Hall of Languages 525. Up-to-date office hours will be confirmed on the course schedule. The TA’s office hours will be announced during discussion sections.

Basic Introduction

Not surprisingly, this course is about Critical Thinking. This includes, but is not limited to, the following: understanding the nature and components of different kinds of arguments and forms of reasoning; recognizing various fallacies and missteps in reasoning; understanding and being able to think critically about different (putative) sources of information, including science, the mainstream media, and so on.

Potential topics (subject to change, and more than we will cover)

- Reasons and arguments (Ch. 1, 3)
- Formal logic and deductive arguments (Ch. 4)
- Enumerative induction & analogical induction (Ch. 5)
- Hume’s Challenge
- Causal arguments (Ch. 9)
- Definitions, necessary and sufficient conditions, essences, generic statements (Ch. 9)
- Inference to the best explanation and evaluating theories (Ch. 10)
- Scientific theories (Ch. 11)
- Reductio Ad Absurdum
- Some standard fallacies (Ch. 12)
- Evaluating evidence and experts (Ch. 6)
- Fake news (Ch. 7)
- Obstacles to critical thinking (Ch. 2)

Course goals

- Learn about various issues relevant to critical thinking, ranging from underlying theoretical issues to those that apply more directly to day-to-day situations.
- Learn about some related philosophical issues and famous arguments.
- Practice critical thinking.
- [Help the instructor improve the course for next time.]

Nuts and bolts

Blackboard. We will be making heavy use of Blackboard. Make sure you are familiar with the course Blackboard page, and make sure you are in the habit of checking for any announcements and changes to the schedule (posted on Blackboard, but you should also be able to save a direct link). You are responsible for any information posted on Blackboard.

Readings. There is one required text for the class: *Concise Guide to Critical Thinking*, 2nd Edition, by Lewis Vaughn (Oxford University Press, 2021). It is on order through the university bookstore and is easily available from the standard online sources (e.g. Amazon). You need to have a copy of the book by the end of the second week of class. Any readings aside from this text will be made available on the course website.

Email. Make sure you check your SU email account on a regular basis. When you send either the instructor of the TA an email, please make sure "PHI171" is in the subject line. We check email regularly, but things can slip through the cracks. If you send an email to which you expect a response and do not hear back in a few days, please do not be bashful about sending a gentle reminder.

Technology in the classroom. The instructor does not want to ban potentially useful technology, but there are serious issues here. There is compelling evidence that use of laptops/tablets in the classroom has a negative effect on student learning and can be disruptive for other students. So here are some rules:

- Cell phones must be silenced and kept out of sight. If it seems like your phone is distracting you or those around you, you may be singled out and repeat offenders may be asked to leave the room.
- If you use a laptop or tablet, you need to have no contact with social media. This includes getting notifications of messages or social media posts. If you don't know how to turn off notifications on your device, keep the device out of sight. Repeat offenders may be asked to leave the room.
- The TA may impose additional constraints on the use of technology in the discussion sections.

Punctuality. Please be on time for class. The instructor will aim to start on time. At this point you should be sitting down with books and notes open and ready to go.

- Students who arrive late will be asked to sit in the front row.
- If there is some reason you will have trouble getting to class on time, please let the instructor and/or TA know.

Grading. The instructor and TA will do our best to strike a balance between giving you helpful feedback, getting the grading completed in a timely manner, and respecting the TA's job description. Some course requirements may be graded with minimal comments and using a coarse-grained scale. If you would like more detailed feedback on any of your work, please schedule an appointment to meet with us in person during office hours.

Use of class materials

Original class materials, including handouts, assignments, exams, recordings of class sessions, etc., are the intellectual property of the course instructor. You may download these materials for your use in this class. However, you may not provide these materials to other parties (e.g., web sites, social media, other students) without permission. Doing so is a violation of intellectual property law and of the student code of conduct.

Course Requirements

Assignments/quizzes	30%	Due throughout the semester
Exam 1	20%	Date TBA (roughly ⅓ through the semester)
Exam 2	25%	Date TBA (roughly ⅔ through the semester)
Exam 3	25%	During the scheduled exam time-slot (TBA)
Attendance & Participation	see below	

Assignments/quizzes. There will be a short assignment for most topics we cover and there may be additional assignments and quizzes associated with the discussion sections. Your lowest grade on an assignment/quiz will be dropped and the rest will be averaged. Assignments that are late will be graded with minimal comments, a 20% deduction, and on a coarse-grained scale (e.g. 0%/50%/60%/70%/80%).

Exams. Exams will be written in class and may have an additional take-home component. Any questions answered in class will be based on Study Guides that will be made available in advance. Answers to any take-home questions will need to be submitted before the scheduled start of the exam.

Attendance & Participation.

- You will start out with a 4-point bonus.
- There will be a deduction of 1-point for each unexcused absence from class, and ½-point each time you are late or miss a substantial amount of class. This includes both the main lectures and discussion sections.
- You may earn an additional Participation Bonus. This will be decided jointly by the instructor and the TA at the end of the semester. This will be based on any signs of high engagement both inside and outside of the classroom. This will rarely be more than a few percentage points.

Dealing with special circumstances

If you want an absence excused or an extension on any required work, you need to contact the TA and/or instructor and you need to take steps to legitimize your reason for making the request. Please take the following seriously:

- **Dean of Students Office**. If you have a substantial issue during the semester (serious or prolonged illness, death in the family, etc.) that risks undermining your academic performance, it is *strongly* recommended that you contact the Dean of Students Office. They can not only provide support but can reach out to all of your instructors in a coordinated way.
- **Provide documentation**. Think about what you can do to substantiate your request. This does not need to be something as definitive as a note from a doctor or lawyer explicitly stating that you cannot attend class. Visiting the health center or any other health professional, getting tested for COVID, attending a funeral, and so on, should all yield *some* kind of documentation that helps to make it clear that you have faced an issue and/or are taking steps to address it.
- **Make a plan**. You know the details of your situation and you are the one who ultimately needs to deal with it. Approach us with a plan and some ideas for how we can help you.
- Being scheduled to work or having plane tickets to visit family or go on holiday are <u>not</u> legitimate reasons to reschedule an exam or get an extension on a major course requirement.

Academic Integrity

There is a document on the course Blackboard site called, "Statement about Academic Integrity". You need to print this, read it, sign it, and submit it in the appropriate place (where you downloaded it) on Blackboard. If you are not comfortable doing this, please speak to the instructor as soon as possible. Your work will not be graded until you have submitted a signed copy of this document or spoken to the instructor.

Disability-Related Accommodations

Syracuse University values diversity and inclusion; we are committed to a climate of mutual respect and full participation. There may be aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in barriers to your inclusion and full participation in this course. The instructor invites you to discuss strategies and/or accommodations (academic adjustments) that may be essential to your success and to collaborate with the Center for Disability Resources (CDR) in this process.

If you would like to discuss disability-accommodations or register with CDR, please visit Center for Disability Resources. Please call (315) 443-4498 or email disabilityresources@syr.edu for more detailed information. The CDR is responsible for coordinating disability-related academic accommodations and will work with the student to develop an access plan. Since academic accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact CDR as soon as possible to begin this process.

Religious observances

Syracuse University's Religious Observances Policy recognizes the diversity of faiths represented in the campus community and protects the rights of students, faculty, and staff to observe religious holy days according to their traditions. Under the policy, students are given an opportunity to make up any examination, study, or work requirements that may be missed due to a religious observance, provided they notify their instructors no later than the academic drop deadline. For observances occurring before the drop deadline, notification is required at least two academic days in advance. Students may enter their observances in MySlice under Student Services/Enrollment/My Religious Observances/Add a Notification.

Wellness and mental health

The past few years have been stressful for many people and this has had a noticeable effect in the classroom. If you begin to suspect that you might be facing any relevant issues, *please* do not hesitate to address the issues and to take advantage of the resources that the university makes available. Below is some text from the university that the instructor strongly recommends taking seriously.

Mental health and overall well-being are significant predictors of academic success. As such it is essential that during your college experience you develop the skills and resources effectively to navigate stress, anxiety, depression and other mental health concerns. Please familiarize yourself with the range of resources the Barnes Center provides and seek out support for mental health concerns as needed. Counseling services are available 24/7, 365 days, at 315.443.8000. I encourage you to explore the resources available through the Wellness Leadership Institute.

Some warnings

The class schedule will be fluid. The instructor is annoyingly bad at predicting how long it will take to get through material and (equally annoyingly) likes to have the flexibility to speed up or slow down for various reasons. The instructor will do his best to post information on the course schedule about what we are covering in class and what you need to do.

Sorry, no bells and whistles. The instructor doesn't do very much as far as attention-grabbing media or creative assignments. Hopefully you will find some of the material we are covering interesting. Having a stiff cup of coffee before class is a good idea too.

This class is a work in progress. The instructor believes in the importance of the class and plans to continue teaching it in the future. The instructor also thinks this is a surprisingly difficult class to teach and would very much appreciate any input you have as far as things he might consider for the future.

How to succeed in this class

Be honest with yourself about what you want out of the class. Do you need to get an A because anything short of this might prevent you from getting into your preferred law school? If so, you might want to open a line of communication with the instructor/TA early in the semester. Do you have other priorities and are more interested in minimizing the amount of work you put into the class than getting a high grade? If so, you might want to find ways to be efficient with your work for the class, e.g. make sure you do the basics and don't need to waste time making up for late/missing work.

Attend and be on time for *every* class session. Once you start to cut corners, things will slide downhill. Missing classes will have an effect on your grade that will add up very quickly.

Get everything submitted on time—no exceptions. Again, missing work will have an effect on your grade that will add up very quickly. It is better to hand in something that you are not happy with than to get zero on something. No promises, but if you submit a piece of work that you are not happy with and resubmit an improved version a few days later, the instructor/TA are likely to be understanding.

Take advantage of the time you spend in class. You are here anyway, you might as well use the time effectively.

Be proactive. If you don't understand something in class or in the readings, or something seems interesting or just plain wrong, don't be bashful about speaking up. Chances are that you are not alone and your classmates will be thankful that you said something. The class will be more interesting and easier if you are engaged.

***Get organized and focus explicitly and self-consciously on developing good work habits.** Seriously. If you aren't already doing this, now is the time to start. Right now.

A final note about our respective responsibilities

We (the instructor and the TA) will do our best to make the course requirements fair, to give you constructive feedback on your work in a timely manner, and to adapt to whatever unforeseen circumstances may arise during the semester in a way that is transparent and fair.

You can help! Instructors spend a significant amount of time dealing with issues that do not contribute to student learning: we sift through excuses for missing class or course requirements, respond to questions about things that are clearly stated on the course syllabus or Blackboard, and so on. This takes away from the time that we have to prepare for class, to give constructive and timely feedback on your work, and to meet with students outside of class. Help us minimize the amount of time that we need to waste.