

# PHL 550: Knowledge, Truth, and Belief (Epistemology)

Semester: **Fall 2021**  
Instructor: **Dr. Liz Jackson Withorn**  
Email: [lizjackson111@ryerson.ca](mailto:lizjackson111@ryerson.ca)

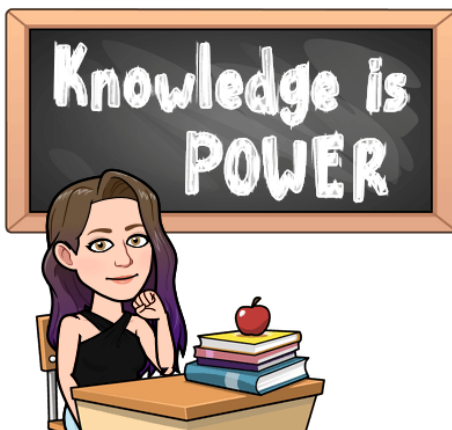
I respond to email **M–F before 5pm ET**  
Office hours: **Mondays, 12-1pm & by appt.**



## Course Description

*Epistemology* is **the study of knowledge**. *Belief* and *truth* are parts of knowledge. But what are the other components of knowledge? How much can we know? Could someone know that God exists? How do other people affect what we can (and can't) know?

This class will have four units. Here are examples of the questions we will cover.



**(Unit 1: Knowledge)** What is knowledge? What is truth? When is a belief justified? Are there other components of knowledge? Should we even analyze knowledge at all?

**(Unit 2: Skepticism)** Can we know anything? If so, what can we know? Is our knowledge non-existent, very limited, or widespread?

**(Unit 3: Social Epistemology)** When should we believe someone else's testimony? How does social media affect what we can know? Is it ever okay to believe beyond—or even against—the evidence?

**(Unit 4: Religious Epistemology)** Can faith be rational but go beyond the evidence? What is Pascal's wager? Does it provide us a good reason to believe in God?

## Learning Outcomes

At the end of this course, students should be able to:

- Explain and illustrate the main components of *knowledge*: truth, belief, justification, etc.
- Explain the Gettier problem and several solutions to it.

- Understand and analyze arguments for and against skepticism.
- Understand debates in social and religious epistemology and apply them to today's issues.
- Demonstrate in-depth understanding of a particular argument or topic we discuss in class. Evaluate the argument and assess objections to it.
- Learn to discuss philosophy with others effectively and to ask good philosophical questions.

## Contacting Me

**Office hours:** Most weeks, I will host a 1-hour Q&A/office hour on **Mondays, noon-1pm**. Attendance is totally optional. See the schedule document for the exact dates. <https://ryerson.zoom.us/j/96237625062>

- If you would like to meet with me privately, I'm available by appointment on weekday afternoons (I'm in Eastern time). Email me to set up an appointment.

**Email:** I'm also available to answer questions via email. Keep in mind:

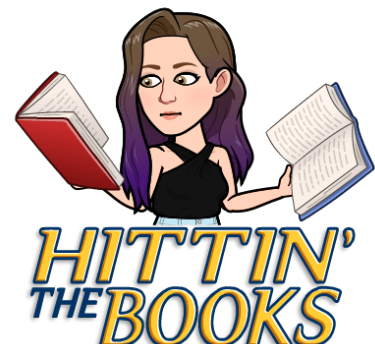
- I respond to email on weekdays before 5pm ET, and I'm almost never available via email on weekends. (Example: if you write to me with a question on Friday evening, you likely won't hear back until Monday).
- Please check to see if your question is answered on the syllabus or course schedule before emailing me.
- Please be professional in your emails to me. Start your email with something like:
  - o Dear Dr. Jackson/Professor Jackson/Dr. Liz Jackson
- And then sign your email with something like:
  - o Best/Sincerely, Your Name
- I won't respond to emails 24 hours before a large assignment is due. (Please don't wait until the last minute to start an assignment!)

Note: You can call me Dr. Jackson, Professor Jackson, or Dr. Liz Jackson.

## Assignments and Grading

**Schedule:** A full course schedule, with all dates and links to readings/ videos, is [available at this link](#). Please refer to this sheet for links to readings and due dates.

**Late work:** Late work will be deducted one-third letter grade for each day late (A to A-, etc.). However, I am flexible and generous with extensions, because (i) pandemic and (ii) to discourage plagiarism.



**Alternative Arrangements:** Students must inform their instructors of any situation which may have a negative effect upon their academic performance, and must request any accommodations according to the relevant policies well in advance. Failure to do so will jeopardize any academic appeals.

- Ryerson University's complete policy concerning alternate arrangements for medical and compassionate reasons may be found [here](#).
- **Medical Considerations:** In order for alternate arrangements to be made on medical grounds, a student must provide, within three working days, (1) a Ryerson Medical Certificate and (2) an Academic Consideration Form. Both documents must be submitted to the student's program department. They can be found [here](#).
- **Religious Observance:** If a student needs accommodation due to religious observance, they must submit (1) a Request for Accommodation of Student Religious, Aboriginal and Spiritual Observance Form and (2) an Academic Consideration Form, within the first two weeks of classes, or, for a final examination, within two weeks of the posting of the examination schedule. If the required absence occurs within the first two weeks of classes, or the dates are not known well in advance as they are linked to other conditions, these forms should be submitted with as much lead time as possible in advance of the required absence. Forms must be submitted to the student's program department. They can be found [here](#).
- **Compassionate Considerations:** In order for alternate arrangements to be made on compassionate grounds, the student must deliver, within three working days, an Academic Consideration Form, along with appropriate documentation (if necessary), to the student's program department. This form can be found [here](#).
- Alternate arrangements will only be made on the basis of circumstances that are both (1) legitimate and (2) unforeseeable. Some examples of circumstances that typically fail to meet one or both of these conditions are: extra-curricular activities, employment obligations, multiple deadlines / academic workload, and computer malfunctions.

**Plagiarism:** Plagiarism is representing another's work as your own. To put it simply: **DO NOT PLAGIARIZE**. Just don't do it. I take plagiarism very seriously. To discourage plagiarism, I am generous with extensions for late work. If you need more time on an assignment, let me know. I promise things will work out better if you communicate with me, rather than plagiarizing.

- If you consult a resource in your writing, **cite it**. If you paraphrase a resource in your writing, **cite it**. If you quote a resource in your writing, **cite it**. (I don't care how you cite it—you can describe or link it in a footnote, in parenthesis, or in a bibliography at the end.)

**Texts:** While many of our readings will come from Jennifer Nagel's book, *Knowledge*, I will provide PDFs of all the readings so there is no need to purchase anything. In

addition, we will be working from a variety of material, including professional philosophy articles, opinion pieces, podcasts, and video. Each topic will have required material. Most topics will have further recommended material.

- I am not a fan of bogging students down with long, boring readings. I've done my best to keep all readings and lectures short and manageable, and I've assigned a lot of videos and podcasts to supplement the readings.
- In exchange, **I ask that you *actually* do the readings, watch the videos, and listen to the podcasts.** All readings/podcasts/videos assignments include an interactive component (message boards, reading responses, or group work).

**Grading scale:** Ryerson has a [standardized grading scale for undergraduate courses](#).

**Final Exam:** There's no final exam for this class. Instead, students will write a final paper.

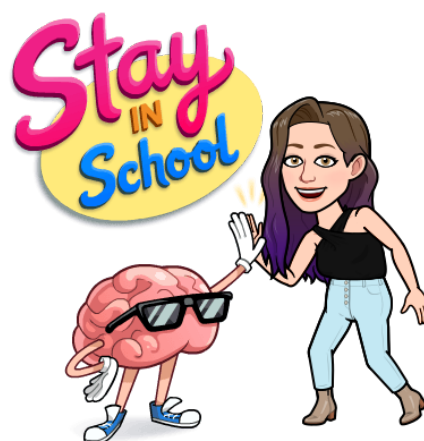
**Assignments:** The chart below summarizes the assignments in this course. Below provides more detail on each category.

| Assignment        | Value | Components                                                                     | Grading                  |
|-------------------|-------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| (1) Participation | 40 %  | 1. Message board posts<br>2. Reading reflections<br>3. Large group discussions | Pass/Fail                |
| (2) Group work    | 30 %  | 1. Small group discussions and reflections<br>2. Two podcasts                  | Self- and Group-assessed |
| (3) Final paper   | 30 %  | You will respond to a prompt.<br>Details TBA.                                  | Traditional              |

### Participation (40%)

Even though we can't have in-person discussion, philosophy is best done by active reflection on ideas and interaction with others. These assignments also ensure you're keeping up with the asynchronous aspects of class. There are three components of participation.

- **Message board posts** (graded pass/fail): in weekly message board posts, students will respond to, evaluate, or raise questions about a video/podcast/reading. Students are also



required to respond to at least two other posts on the message board per week.

- Your post: **Due Wednesday of each week by 11:59pm Eastern.**
- Your two responses: **Due FRIDAY of each week by 11:59pm Eastern.**
- **Reading reflections** (graded pass/fail): 1-2 reading reflections will be required per unit (see schedule). Reading reflections have three parts:
  - (1) summarizing the reading
  - (2) evaluating the reading
  - (3) communicating outstanding questions about the readingReading reflections are **due FRIDAY of each week by 11:59pm Eastern.**
- **Large group discussion / Q&A:** Once per unit, we will all meet as a large group via Zoom. This meeting will consist of material review and discussion. **Attendance will be taken.** If a student can't attend the meeting, they will have an alternative 500-word writing assignment.  
<https://ryerson.zoom.us/j/96237625062>
  - See the schedule document for the dates of the large group discussions.

*A note on pass/fail assignments:* While these are graded pass/fail, **I will read both the message board posts and the reflections.**

- To earn an A+ (90/100) it must be clear that the student both did the reading and reflected on it. If they do not sufficiently demonstrate this, they will not pass and receive a (0/100). This does **not** mean that, in order to earn an A+ (90/100) the student must have a perfect understanding of the reading, but instead these assignments should reflect an effort to understand the ideas presented and critically evaluate them.
- In rare cases, a student may earn more than a 90/100 on the message boards. This can happen if one's posts *consistently* demonstrate an unusual depth of engagement with the readings and/or creative connections to the real world.

### Group Work (30%)

Students will be in groups of ~5; these will be your groups throughout the semester. Groups will be announced shortly after the drop/add date, September 17. There are two components to group work.



- The first, weighed more heavily, is **two group podcasts**. These podcasts should do three things:
  - (1) explain a debate simply, using lots of examples
  - (2) respond to and evaluate the debate

(3) reflect on a unit more generally, and discuss how the debate fits into the unit

- The second is **small group discussions and reflections**. Groups will meet on their own twice throughout the semester (without a required podcast component). Groups will use this time to reflect on that week's reading together and work through a worksheet of discussion questions. Each group will turn in the worksheet based on what they discussed, and submit a screenshot of their meeting.

*A note on self- and group-assessment:* I realize that group work can be difficult when not everyone participates or contributes. For this reason, both components of group work will be self- and group- assessed. This means you will give both yourself and your group members a grade (and explanation for that grade) based on participation and contribution to the group. **The final group-work grade is determined by the instructor**, but I will take self and group grades into account.

### Final Paper (30%)

I will provide prompt(s) for paper topics. While the paper is due during finals week, students will be required to choose a topic and submit a rough outline of what they plan to argue earlier in the semester. This paper is 30% of your grade, so I encourage planning ahead and working on it well before it is due.

- *A note on paper length:* While there will be a word minimum for your papers, quality is much more important than quantity. I strongly prefer a tightly-argued paper to a long, rambling paper without much substance.
- *A note on paper submission:* I grade blindly, so **I ask that you do not submit papers with your name, only your Ryerson student ID number**. Papers will be submitted via Google form.



### Important Information

**Ryerson Code of Conduct:** Ryerson University's [Student Code of Academic Conduct](#) defines academic misconduct, the processes the University will follow when academic misconduct is suspected, and the consequences that can be imposed if students are found guilty of misconduct. Further information is also available at [www.ryerson.ca/academicintegrity](http://www.ryerson.ca/academicintegrity). Ryerson University's [Student Code of Non-Academic Conduct](#) covers, among other things, disruption of learning and teaching.



**Accessibility:** I am committed to providing all students with the resources needed for their success. Please inform me of any way I can assist you to enjoy and thrive in this course. Ryerson's [Student Learning Support](#) cluster provides valuable programs and initiatives for academic accommodation, English language support, math support, study skills and transition support, and writing support.

**Ryerson University Mental Health Statement:** At Ryerson, we recognize that things can come up throughout the term that may interfere with a student's ability to succeed in their coursework. These circumstances are outside of one's control and can have a serious impact on physical and mental well-being. Seeking help can be a challenge, especially in those times of crisis. Below are resources we encourage all Ryerson community members to access to ensure support is reachable.

<https://www.ryerson.ca/mental-health-wellbeing>

**If support is needed immediately, you can access these outside resources at anytime:**

- **Distress Line** – 24/7 line for if you are in crisis, feeling suicidal or in need of emotional support (phone: 416-408-4357)
- **Good2Talk**- 24/7 hour line for postsecondary students (phone: 1-866-925-5454)

**Pandemic:** We are currently living in an extraordinarily difficult season in the history of human beings. I'm committed to helping you learn in an environment where you are supported, especially this semester. **If, at any point in the semester, you face COVID-19 related difficulties, please let me know how I can support you more effectively.** For more about COVID at Ryerson, see:

<https://www.ryerson.ca/covid-19/>

**Zoom Link:** We will use the same Zoom link for our Monday Q&As and our Monday Large Group Meetings. Here is the full link:

Liz Jackson is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom meeting.

Topic: PHL 550: Monday Meeting

Time: This is a recurring meeting Meet anytime

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://ryerson.zoom.us/j/96237625062>

Meeting ID: 962 3762 5062

One tap mobile

+12042727920,,96237625062# Canada

+14388097799,,96237625062# Canada

Dial by your location

+1 204 272 7920 Canada

+1 438 809 7799 Canada

+1 587 328 1099 Canada

+1 647 374 4685 Canada

+1 647 558 0588 Canada

+1 778 907 2071 Canada

+1 301 715 8592 US (Washington DC)

+1 312 626 6799 US (Chicago)

+1 646 558 8656 US (New York)

+1 253 215 8782 US (Tacoma)

+1 346 248 7799 US (Houston)

+1 669 900 6833 US (San Jose)

Meeting ID: 962 3762 5062

Find your local number: <https://ryerson.zoom.us/j/96237625062>

Join by SIP

96237625062@zoomcrc.com

Join by H.323

162.255.37.11 (US West)

162.255.36.11 (US East)

115.114.131.7 (India Mumbai)

115.114.115.7 (India Hyderabad)

213.19.144.110 (Amsterdam Netherlands)

213.244.140.110 (Germany)

103.122.166.55 (Australia Sydney)

103.122.167.55 (Australia Melbourne)

149.137.40.110 (Singapore)

64.211.144.160 (Brazil)

149.137.68.253 (Mexico)

69.174.57.160 (Canada Toronto)

65.39.152.160 (Canada Vancouver)

207.226.132.110 (Japan Tokyo)

149.137.24.110 (Japan Osaka)

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