PHIL 1250: Critical Thinking

Fall Semester 2026

Instructor: Dr. Gretchen Ellefson
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Office Hours: M: 12-3:30, Tu: 2:30-4, or by appointment

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Tutoring hours: TBD

Course Description

Every day, we are each presented with a huge amount of information: in classes, on social media, in the news, in our conversations and classes, etc. Not all of this information is consistent with the rest, and not all of it is equally trustworthy. But how should we process and evaluate it? How can we distinguish between true and false claims, or good and bad reasoning? In this course, we will explore this notion of *reasoning*, and the related notion of *argumentation*. Students will learn to distinguish good reasoning from bad reasoning, identify common forms of faulty reasoning, learn skills for identifying and constructing strong arguments, and distinguish different kinds of reasoning and what makes each strong. They will also learn to critically engage with arguments and viewpoints, attempting to draw out the assumptions behind them and their implications. The skills students develop in this course will be useful for understanding argumentative strategies central to philosophy and other academic disciplines. In addition, it will put students in a stronger position to take standardized tests like the GRE and the LSAT. These skills will make students stronger candidates for nearly any job: skills in reasoning and analysis are necessary for many jobs that involve decision making and creative problem solving. Finally, students will see that the tools they gain in this course will be useful for processing and engaging with arguments and claims they encounter in everyday life.

This course satisfies the *Humanities Knowledge Area*.

Course Learning Objectives

See the General Education requirements and Essential Learning Outcomes here.

In this course, students will satisfy the Humanities Essential Learning Outcomes by:

- Developing skills in *close analysis*, *questioning, reasoning, interpretation,* and *critical thinking*. (Humanities ELO 3)
- Using those skills to identify and analyze arguments within philosophy as well as in other contexts (ELO 1)
- Identifying sources of disagreement and whether those disagreements result from differences in worldview or values, or from mistakes and misunderstandings (ELO 1, 2, 4).
- Applying the tools learned in this course to reflect on and develop their own perspectives on a wide range of topics and issues (ELO 5).

Evaluation

You will be evaluated based on

- Attendance
  - **10%** of your grade

    - You have two no-questions-asked unexcused absences. Any unexcused absence after the first two will result in a 25% reduction in your attendance grade. If you have six or more unexcused absences, you will receive a 0 for your attendance grade. Students who are more than 10 minutes late for class will count as absent for that day.
- Participation
    - **10%** of your grade total
    - Active engagement with the class, class material, and fellow students is crucial for an effective and engaging classroom setting. Participation is what helps me know what you are and are not understanding; it helps you identify gaps in understanding, etc.
    - In this class, participation means:
        - Reading and working toward understanding of the course material by the point at which it is necessary.
        - Attentively listening to the instructor and other students during class time.
        - Asking and answering questions as appropriate in class meetings.
- Weekly assignments:
    - **20%** of your grade total
    - Each week you will have a set of exercises designed to help you practice the skills you are learning in class. Some assignments, or some portion of assignments, will be done in class. Others will be treated as homework assignments.
    - Portions of the weekly assignments will be graded on completion (if you attempt all portions, you will receive full marks). Other sections will be graded based on skill. Each portion will be made clear on the assignment.
    - You may work with other students on weekly assignments
- Quizzes:
    - **30%** of your grade total
    - Quizzes will typically cover two chapters at a time.
    - Quizzes are pass/fail: these are checks on whether you have managed to master the skills for that section.
    - Students who fail a quiz may retake (different versions of) the quiz until they pass.
- Exams:
    - **30%** of your grade total (15% each)
    - To take place in week 9 and during finals week
    - Cumulative, covering all previous material from class.

Late Work

All assigned work will receive a 5 percent penalty for each 24 hour period the assignment is late without prearranging an exception, up to five days late. However, no-penalty extensions will typically be granted when requested via email or Canvas message **before** the assigned work is due.

Attendance

Attendance is required and graded. Students have two no-questions-asked absences with no impact on their grade. In addition, no-penalty excused absences will be granted when a student informs me **in advance** of excusing circumstances, and in cases of emergency. See below for excusing circumstances.

Any unexcused absence after the first two will result in a 25% reduction in the attendance grade.

Excusing circumstances include: illness, child's illness, DRC approved disability or mental health issues, unexpected and unforeseeable transportation failures. If you think you have an excusing circumstance that is not on this list, feel free to let me know, though I do not guarantee that I will grant other excuses.

Artificial Intelligence

Use of AI for quizzes, tests, and all in-class assignments is prohibited, and use of AI for these assignments may result in a score of zero for the assignment. All other uses of AI must be disclosed and justified (that is, you must include a paragraph at the beginning of the assignment letting me know how you used it and why you think it was appropriate to use). If I judge that the use of AI detracted from the educational significance of the assignment, I may ask you to redo the assignment without using AI.

At the end of the day, I am interested in equipping students to learn independent critical thinking. One of the well-documented effects of extensive use of AI is something known as "cognitive offloading," wherein someone assigns cognitive tasks to AI rather than taking them on themselves. While this can be useful in some cases, it is quite counter-productive in an educational setting where the goal is to develop the very cognitive skill that you are offloading to AI. Thus, most uses of AI will not be treated as acceptable in this class.

Required Text

All students must be in possession of the textbook, information provided below.

> McLaughlin, Jeff. How to Think Critically: A Concise Guide, Second Edition. Ontario: Broadview Press. 2023.

Any additional readings will be posted on Canvas.

While I do not think you will necessarily need them, you are welcome to use other online sources to supplement your understanding of the course material. Here are a couple of YouTube channels with some useful resources:

- The Wireless Philosophy YouTube channel has a great series on critical thinking: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLtKNX4SfKpzX_bhh4LOEWEGy3pkLmFDmk
- The Crash Course YouTube channel has some good videos about logic and critical thinking (though there isn't a nicely organized playlist like Wireless Philosophy has): https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCX6b17PVsYBQ0ip5gyeme-Q

Course Schedule

Date	Topic	Reading	Assignments and evaluation
Week 1: Sept 2-4	Introduction; logic and argument basics	McLaughlin, Chapter 1	
Week 2: Sept 7-11	Introduction: logic and argument basics	McLaughlin, Chapter 1	

Week 3: September 14-18	Language and precision	McLaughlin, Chapter 2	
Week 4: September 21-25	Argument Structure and Assessment	McLaughlin, Chapter 3	Quiz over Chapters 1 and 2
Week 5: September 28-October 2	Argument Evaluation	McLaughlin, Chapter 4	
Week 6: October 5-9	Argument Types	McLaughlin, Chapter 5	Quiz over chapters 3 and 4
Week 7: October 12-16	Fallacies OR Catch Up	[If on schedule, McLaughlin Chapter 6. If not, no new reading]	
Week 8: Oct 19 (Fall Break)-23	Categorical Logic	McLaughlin, Chapter 7	Quiz over chapter 5 (and 6, if we do it)
Week 9: October 26-30	Categorical Logic	McLaughlin, Chapter 7	Exam 1
Week 10: November 2-6	Propositional Logic: Translations and Truth Tables	Reading on Canvas; McLaughlin Chapter 8 is optional	Quiz over chapter 7
Week 11: November 9-13	Propositional Logic: Translations and Truth Tables	Reading on Canvas	
Week 12: November 16-20	Propositional Logic: Natural Deduction*		
THANKSGIVING BREAK November 23-27			
Week 13: November 30-December 4	Propositional Logic: Natural Deduction*		
Week 14: December 7-11	Review		Quiz: Propositional Logic and Natural Deduction
FINALS WEEK: Dec 14-18			Final Exams: 9am class: December 16 at 9am 10am class: December 17 at 9am

*It is very likely that we will be a little bit behind by the end of the semester. We will do natural deduction if we have time.

University Required Syllabus Statements:

ACADEMIC CREDIT: According to the federal definition of a Carnegie credit hour: A credit hour of work is the equivalent of approximately 60 minutes of class time or independent study work. A minimum of 45 hours of work by each student is required for each unit of credit. Credit is earned only when course requirements are met. One (1) credit hour is equivalent to 15 contact hours of lecture, discussion, testing, evaluation, or seminar, as well as 30 hours of student homework. An equivalent amount of work is expected for laboratory work, internships, practica, studio, and other academic work leading to the awarding of credit hours. Credit granted for individual courses, labs, or studio classes ranges from 0.5 to 15 credit hours per semester.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM: SUU is operated for the common good of the greater community it serves. The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition. Academic Freedom is the right of faculty to study, discuss, investigate, teach, and publish. Academic Freedom is essential to these purposes and applies to both teaching and research.

Academic Freedom in the realm of teaching is fundamental for the protection of the rights of the faculty member and of you, the student, with respect to the free pursuit of learning and discovery. Faculty members possess the right to full freedom in the classroom in discussing their subjects. They may present any controversial material relevant to their courses and their intended learning outcomes, but they shall take care not to introduce into their teaching controversial materials which have no relation to the subject being taught or the intended learning outcomes for the course.

As such, students enrolled in any course at SUU may encounter topics, perspectives, and ideas that are unfamiliar or controversial, with the educational intent of providing a meaningful learning environment that fosters your growth and development. These parameters related to Academic Freedom are included in SUU Policy 6.6.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY: Scholastic honesty is expected of all students. Dishonesty will not be tolerated and will be prosecuted to the fullest extent (see SUU Policy 6.33). You are expected to have read and understood the current SUU student conduct code (SUU Policy 11.2) regarding student responsibilities and rights, the intellectual property policy (SUU Policy 5.52), information about procedures, and what constitutes acceptable behavior.

Please Note: The use of websites or services that sell essays is a violation of these policies; likewise, the use of websites or services that provide answers to assignments, quizzes, or tests is also a violation of these policies. Regarding the use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), you should check with your individual course instructor.

ADA STATEMENT: Students with medical, psychological, learning, or other disabilities desiring academic adjustments, accommodations, or auxiliary aids will need to contact the Disability Resource Center, located in Room 206F of the Sharwan Smith Center or by phone at (435) 865-8042. The Disability Resource Center determines eligibility for and authorizes the provision of services.

If your instructor requires attendance, you may need to seek an ADA accommodation to request an exception to this attendance policy. Please contact the Disability Resource Center to determine what, if any, ADA accommodations are reasonable and appropriate.

NON-DISCRIMINATION STATEMENT: SUU is committed to fostering an inclusive community of lifelong learners and believes our university's encompassing of different views, beliefs, and identities makes us stronger, more innovative, and better prepared for the global society.

SUU does not discriminate on the basis of race, religion, color, national origin, citizenship, sex (including sex discrimination and sexual harassment), sexual orientation, gender identity, age, ancestry, disability status, pregnancy, pregnancy-related conditions, genetic information, military status, veteran status, or other bases protected by applicable law in employment, treatment, admission, access to educational programs and activities, or other University benefits or services.

SUU strives to cultivate a campus environment that encourages freedom of expression from diverse viewpoints. We encourage all to dialogue within a spirit of respect, civility, and decency.

For additional information on non-discrimination, please see SUU Policy 5.27 and/or visit: https://www.suu.edu/nondiscrimination.

PREGNANCY: Students who are or become pregnant during this course may receive reasonable modifications to facilitate continued access and participation in the course. Pregnancy and related conditions are broadly defined to include pregnancy, childbirth, termination of pregnancy, lactation, related medical conditions, and recovery. To obtain reasonable modifications, please make a request to: title9@suu.edu. To learn more visit: https://www.suu.edu/titleix/pregnancy.html

MANDATORY REPORTING: University policy (SUU Policy 5.60) requires instructors to report disclosures received from students that indicate they have been subjected to sexual misconduct/harassment. The University defines sexual harassment consistent with Federal Regulations (34 C.F.R. Part 106, Subpart D) to include quid pro quo, hostile environment harassment, sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence, and stalking. When students communicate this information to an instructor in-person, by email, or within writing assignments, the instructor will report that to the Title IX Coordinator to ensure students receive support from the Title IX Office. A reporting form is available at https://cm.maxient.com/reportingform.php?SouthernUtahUniv

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT STATEMENT: In case of an emergency, the University's Emergency Notification System (ENS) will be activated. Students are encouraged to maintain updated contact information using the link on the homepage of the mySUU portal. In addition, students are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the Emergency Response Protocols posted in each classroom. Detailed information about the University's emergency management plan can be found at https://www.suu.edu/emergency.

HEOA COMPLIANCE STATEMENT: For a full set of Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) compliance statements, please visit https://www.suu.edu/heoa. The sharing of copyrighted material through peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing, except as provided under U.S.

copyright law, is prohibited by law; additional information can be found at https://my.suu.edu/help/article/1096/heoa-compliance-plan.

You are also expected to comply with policies regarding intellectual property (SUU Policy 5.52) and copyright (SUU Policy 5.54).

SUUSA STATEMENT: As a student at SUU, you have representation from the SUU Student Association (SUUSA) which advocates for student interests and helps work as a liaison between the students and the university administration. You can submit MySUU Voice feedback by going to https://www.suu.edu/suusa/voice. Likewise, you can learn more about SUUSA's Executive Council at https://www.suu.edu/suusa/executive-council and about all of SUUSA's Student Senators at https://www.suu.edu/suusa/senate. If you have any specific concerns regarding any of your courses, please contact the SUUSA *VP of Academics* at: suusa_academicsvp@suu.edu.

Thriving Thunderbirds: Mental health is essential for your academic success. If you are struggling with mental health issues, SUU provides resources, support, and services to help you. Please visit https://www.suu.edu/mentalhealth for access to these valuable resources.

If you need assistance navigating any of the resources, please contact Counseling and Psychological Services, the Dean of Students' Office, or the Health and Wellness Center.

DISCLAIMER STATEMENT: Information contained in this syllabus, other than the grading, late assignments, makeup work, and attendance policies, may be subject to change with advance notice, as deemed appropriate by the instructor.