

CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

(Philosophy 03, Spr 2017)

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Required Texts: Bassham, Gregory et al., *Critical Thinking: A Student's Introduction* (5th Ed.) and Plato's *Apology* (online text)

Suggested Resource: <http://www.criticalthinking.org/articles/becoming-a-critic.cfm>

Course Description:

What is a sound argument? What makes one argument “better” than another?
Is it possible to make claims for validity that go beyond personal feelings or preferences, and that merit our consideration for reasons that stand on their own?

This course is designed to provide you with concepts and distinctions that you need to recognize sound (or weak) arguments, and to analyze the reasoning process presented in a broad range of contexts – for example, editorials or commentary, speeches, political rhetoric, essays, papers, or scholarly texts. It is also intended to give you tools to strengthen your own writing and speaking, to reflect on your assumptions and critique your own views, and to present sound and compelling arguments – not only in class, but in everyday life and work.

Course Objectives:

The course will enable students:

- to distinguish between fact and opinion
- to differentiate between valid and invalid reasoning, and to identify standard fallacies in written and spoken communication
- to understand basic principles of reasoning, such as induction and deduction
- to observe the ways that their own experiences, interests and beliefs influence their own thinking, and to appreciate the value of considering complex issues from a broad range of perspectives
- to analyze and discuss ideas presented in discourse, and to present compelling written arguments for their views
- to develop their own skills of reading, writing and speaking consistent with the principles of sound reasoning and reflection.

Course Methodology

To maximize the value of in-class time, lectures will be kept brief, and will focus on clarifying or expanding material or exercises already presented in assigned texts.

Class time will focus primarily on:

- Assigned discussion exercises and/or topics for each week
- Small group / paired discussion of news or argument analyses prepared by students (typically, in written homework assignments)
- Large group discussion of arguments / essays assigned as reading for that week.

To ensure the full value of the course for all participants, it is expected that students will keep up with assigned readings and written exercises, and maintain regular attendance. You are also expected to bring your text to class, as we will be using it regularly in small group exercises.

Grading

Class participation and attendance	15%
Homework assignments / exercises	20%
Tests (3)	20%
Term Project	25%
Final Exam	20%

Note: Tests are designed to confirm your understanding and retention of basic principles of reasoning. They will parallel homework and in-class assignments. If you must miss a test, a makeup *may* be scheduled if you have communicated with me ahead of the test date/time. Please notify me as soon as you are aware that you will be absent on the test date, to make an alternate arrangement.

Writing Assignments and Exercises

To gain practice in application of critical reflection, interpretation and argumentation, you will have routine assignments that require one of the following:

- gathering and analysis of information on a given topic
- clarification and explanation of key themes, concepts and terms
- reflective analysis of an article, essay or argument of their choosing
- reconstruction of assumptions, arguments and conclusions in an extended article
- outlining of the reasoning you would present to advocate for a particular position or concept (note: a reasoning template will be provided)

Attendance and Late Work Policies:

“Good attendance” means no more than 3 unexcused absences. If you acquire more than this number, your absence(s) will be a factor in determining your final course grade. If

you are absent, any assignments due and submitted by email will be considered on time. Late work will not be accepted except in by prior agreement with the instructor; and in either case, this agreement must be documented in an email message to me, even if we discuss it in my office or in class. There will be no exceptions.

Disability Resources

All students are entitled to full access to all classroom and learning resources. Anyone with a disability that requires an accommodation should inform me at the start of the semester, so we can make appropriate arrangements. You are also encouraged to contact the Disability Resources Department (Analay Village, on the Santa Rosa campus) for additional information or advice.

SOME NOTES ABOUT CLASS DISCUSSIONS:

Since this class involves a good deal of student interaction, it is necessary that we agree to follow some basic guidelines of mutual respect. Many of the topics covered in this course are likely to promote strong emotions. In such an environment, conversations can become passionate and even volatile. We should keep in mind that the principle aim of such discussions is to increase our understanding of the concepts, principles and skills pertaining to the evaluation of issues as well as to foster a respectful understanding and tolerance of each other's perspectives. The classroom must be an environment of free intellectual exchange if this endeavor is to prove successful. Hence, the following will be expected of all students.

- **Respect for Classmates:** At no time will abuse or **personal attacks** (verbal or otherwise) of any student be tolerated. Please refrain from side discussions that do not focus on and forward the material of the course.
- **Come Prepared for Discussions and Exercises:** It is vital that you participate in the courseroom each week, prepared to meaningfully engage in the discussions. This means you should have completed all assigned tasks and readings and come with ask questions, insights, or other contribution in the course materials. I will assume that students understand and respect this policy; however, if it seems to become a problem, we will initiate weekly reading quizzes to help inspire you in preparing appropriately for the class.
- **Note:** SRJC policy cites the expected work level as 2-3 hours preparation for each unit of class. This means if you are taking 3 units, we assume you are studying for 6-9 hours/ week; 12 units, you are studying for 24-36 hours. Please consider this a guideline in estimating time required for a course, whether online or in the physical classroom.
- Please use the resources provided in the Canvas system to familiarize yourself with our platform and with the requirements and protocols for online learning. If you have questions, please direct them to someone who can help. For course content, that is your instructor. For technology concerns, that is the Student Support Desk. For the day-to-day learning process, you are welcome to consult with one another – often a student can respond effectively to your questions – but please refrain from generating panic, anxiety or anger that does not advance learning. For example, “Help! Help! The fricking test is due in an hour and I can’t get it to ‘submit!’” could be, “Has anyone successfully submitted a test, who can help me understand how this works?” Remember, we set the tone for each other’s learning – please be kind!

OFFICE HOURS:

Students are strongly encouraged to use office hours or (if necessary) arrange appointments outside of scheduled office hours to get extra help or clarification on any class topic or assignment. You may email me at any time. I generally check my email at least once a day during the week and once during the weekend.

Library Resource:

An online Library Guide (LibGuide) has been created to assist you in identifying arguments, and finding credible sources to help with argument analysis and evaluation. You are strongly encouraged to utilize this online resource. One of our class sessions will be held in Doyle Library, to familiarize you with use of the LibGuide and other library tools.

FINAL NOTES:

- 1) **Keep this syllabus for the entire semester.** It contains information on how to reach me and will answer many of your questions later in the course.
- 2) **Communicate with me.** Asking questions, expressing thoughts and concerns about the course or just keeping track of your progress in the class are all good reasons to contact me. If you are unable to meet with me during my office hours, an appointment may be possible for an alternative time.
- 3) Though regular homework assignments may be handwritten, they should be legible and grammatically accurate. **All graded assignments must be typed unless otherwise noted.**

SYLLABUS BY WEEKLY TOPIC

Week One

What is Critical Thinking and why does it matter?

Learning Objectives: Students understand the meaning and importance of critical thinking, and are able to recognize and identify many of the common obstacles to sound reasoning and reflection in our everyday thinking and discourse.

Week Two:

Identifying and constructing an argument

Learning Objectives: Students are able to map basic elements of an argument (claims – stated and unstated; presuppositions; assumptions; conclusions) and to assess the logical credibility and validity of simple arguments.

Language Fundamentals

Learning Objectives: Students understand the expressive, informative and directive functions of language, and can differentiate argument from explanatory or expressive discourse, as well as the different categories of claims.

Week Three

Language and Structure: The importance of clarity in the spoken and written word

Learning Objectives: Students see that thinking resides in language, and is aided by clarity, precision and accuracy. They grasp the threat of ambiguity to sound argument; they distinguish fact from opinion; and they grasp the basic structure of an argument.

Relevance and Context

Learning Objectives: Students understand the concepts of positive and negative relevance and irrelevance, and learn to assess the cogency of an argument based on the criteria of *consistency* and *relevance*.

Week Four:

Inductive Reasoning v. Deductive Reasoning

Learning Objectives: Students grasp the nature and value of inductive reasoning, and are able to identify basic inductive arguments, and assess the strength and validity of those arguments in support of various practical claims.

Students are introduced to the structure and types of deductive reasoning, and are able to identify valid and invalid, sound and unsound arguments.

TEST #1

Week Five:

Review of Inductive and Deductive Reasoning

Learning Objectives: Students gain practice in distinguishing between deductive and inductive reasoning, and understand how these are used together in real-world examples.

Composing an Argument I: Stating the Issue

Learning Objectives: Students gain practice in articulating an issue and presenting its various elements and controversies, through various discursive forms. They identify an issue of substantial social significance in contemporary life, and begin to outline the structure of their research project(s).

Week Six:

Validity: Diagramming and Summarizing an Argument in Standardized Form

Learning Objectives: Students continue to define premises – those that are stated, and those that are implicit – and examine the validity of those background elements and their importance to the validity of subsequent claims. Students diagram argument structure showing major and sub-arguments, evidence cited, and how conclusions build on each of those elements.

Week Seven:

Logical Fallacies I: Relevance

Learning Objectives: Students learn to identify a number of common informal fallacies in arguments, and will gather examples of these fallacies in items found in the public media, particularly news, opinion essays and speeches. They will gain practice in finding and identifying these fallacies in a variety of statements, and will work with one another to critique their own written products.

Week Eight:

Logical Fallacies II: Acceptability and Sufficient Grounds

Learning Objectives: Students expand their understanding of fallacies of insufficient grounds, and are also able to determine when a statement should be accepted and when it requires further evidence or support.

PHASE 1 OF TERM PROJECT DUE

Week Nine:

Basic Rhetorical Devices

Learning Objectives: Students recognize common devices that are used in arguments, particularly in the public media, to influence public response and foster desired behaviors and beliefs. They learn to appreciate the importance of clear and accurate definitions in evaluating an argument and drawing sound conclusions.

TEST #2

Week Ten:

Analyzing and Evaluating an Argument / Finding Sources

Learning Objective: Students apply basic principles of logic as they critically read through and analyze the text. They identify and assess premises and assumptions that underlie an argument, and assess rational structure and consistency, as well as conclusions and key gaps in the argument.

Learning Objective: Students are introduced to basic argument research. They understand what constitutes a credible source, and begin to identify sources on alternate sides of the issue they have selected.

Week Eleven:

Validity: Diagramming and Summarizing an Argument in Standardized Form

Learning Objectives: Students continue to define premises – those that are stated, and those that are implicit – and examine the validity of those background elements and their importance to the validity of subsequent claims. Students diagram argument structure showing major and sub-arguments, evidence cited, and how conclusions build on each of those elements.

Week Twelve:

Inductive Reasoning I: Generalization, Analogy, and Statistics

Learning Objectives: are familiar with the function and appropriate use of generalizations, including statistical arguments and predictions, and analogies; and can both assess their validity in discourse and employ analogies as a strategic element in constructing a compelling argument.

Week Thirteen:

Inductive Reasoning II: Science and Pseudoscience; Hypothesis, Causality and Correlation

Learning Objectives: Students understand and are able to assess and construct arguments employing hypothetical constructs and causal assertions. Students appreciate the limitations and pitfalls of these methods and can evaluate the plausibility of conclusions and sources that rely on these forms.

Learning Objectives: Students apply principles of inductive and deductive analysis to evaluate common arguments in the realm of science and causal theories, and begin to apply these same standards in developing their own term projects

TEST #3

Week Fourteen:

Understanding the Media: Thinking Critically about news, opinion/editorials, internet and social media, and advertising

Learning Objectives: Students understand the uses and objectives of various types of public media, and are able to think critically about claims and arguments that are presented in a wide range of public forums.

Week Fifteen:

Composing an Argument II: Argument Design / Research / Evaluating and Using Sources

Learning Objectives: Students compose and discuss an argument for their issue, consisting of a background or context, thesis, and key supportive arguments. They gain practice in applying critical thinking standards to the evaluation of moral and aesthetic arguments, and present a brief team research project on a contemporary issue of the team's choosing. (Library Guide references provided.)

Week Sixteen:***Application and Synthesis of Critical Thinking Tools: Work on Term Projects / Library***

Students synthesize what they have learned individually and collectively, and are able to apply key principles to practical matters of their own lives and work. Students explore ways that critical thinking / writing / reflection are applied in their own writing and research, and practice integrating these methods into their own ongoing assignments. Class time will be provided for writing workshops.

Week Seventeen:***Composing an Argument III: Argument Construction / Presentation / Review***

Learning Objectives: Students present and evaluate an argument on a social issue of their choosing.

work in teams to create a simple presentation of arguments on an issue of their choice, and engage in group discussion and critique of these presentations.

PHASE 3 of TERM PROJECTS DUE**Week Eighteen:**

Learning Objectives: Students present and evaluate an argument on a social issue of their choosing.

PHASE 3 of TERM PROJECTS DUE***Wrap Up and Review***

Summary of basic elements of the course, and application to issues of the students' choosing.

FINAL EXAM

