

LAS 241-AC: Inquiry and Truth

MW 11:00-12:15 pm, SCI 44

Fall 2017

Professor: Jennifer Kling, PhD

Office Hours: MTWR 1-3pm; available by appointment (Sacred Heart Hall 312C)

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Course Description:

Critical thinking and inquiry is, first and foremost, a *practical* endeavor. It allows us to evaluate reasons and arguments—both our own and other people's—so that we can decide whether or not to accept those reasons and arguments and incorporate their conclusions into our daily lives. We accept and reject conclusions all of the time: “I don't need to buy that shirt.” “I should vote for that politician.” “Being a philosophy major, while intellectually fulfilling, is financially risky.” “Sea World is an evil company.” “I believe in God.” “The world just doesn't work that way.” These conclusions are the result of explicit and implicit inquiry, reasoning and argumentation; so whether we should accept them depends on how good those inquiries, reasons and arguments are.

This is where critical thinking comes in—critical thinking is a catch-all term for the process of analyzing and assessing a particular piece of inquiry, reasoning, or argumentation in order to determine its worth. Is the argument true? Is it a strong or weak argument? Does it depend on unsupported assumptions, or is there evidence in its favor? What counts as evidence? Is the argument valid, or does it contain a logical fallacy? Are there good reasons to accept the argument's claims and conclusion(s)? What makes something a good reason? What is it to be a reasonable person? Why do reasons matter at all?

In this course, we will attempt to tackle some of these big questions by focusing on different aspects of what it means to reason well. We will be reading both historical and contemporary texts, with an eye to understanding what others have thought about the nature of inquiry, reason, argumentation, and truth. However, our efforts will not be merely an academic exercise where we will only study what others have thought. Instead, in this course you will be joining in an active and ongoing effort to better understand how to think critically, inquire responsibly, and reason well. You will have to struggle with big concepts that you may not have engaged before, and you will have to work hard to succeed. In other words, in this course you are going to learn how to seek and express truth, which is both difficult and rewarding.

Course Requirements:

Participation (10%): You will need to both do the readings and come to class in order to be successful in this course. If you don't do the readings, you'll be lost in class; if you don't come to class, you'll be lost in the readings and the assignments. While **excessive** participation is not required, some willingness to engage with both me and your fellow classmates is necessary— without this willingness on your part, we won't be able to have the sort of productive class discussions that will enable you to successfully engage in the course. So, while a lack of participation won't harm your grade very much, participation can significantly *help* your grade.

I appreciate that speaking to a classroom full of your peers can be difficult; so, there are a number of other ways to participate in class. You may speak in class, you may engage in small group work, you may visit my office hours, you may send me emails with questions, comments, and concerns, you may start online discussion threads, you may post relevant outside documents/videos/blogs, etc. to the course website, you may tweet and/or blog and/or journal about issues raised in class, etc. If you're unsure of whether some action counts as participation, please see me, and we'll discuss it.

Blog Posts (5% each): You are required to submit **four** blog posts throughout the semester. Blog posts are due by the start of the class period on the due date. **Late posts will not be accepted.** They should be roughly 200-300 words in length, and should *either* lay out the issues surrounding a topic clearly and concisely, *or* contain your critical analysis and considered response to a topic. Blog posts may take the form of a standard text post, a 2-3 minute podcast, or a 2-3 minute video. If you wish to submit a blog post in some other form, please see me, and we'll discuss it. ****Collaboration is encouraged but not required.****

Papers (15% each): There are **four** required academic papers for this course. Each paper should be no longer than 2 pages, and should engage with some issue brought up in the course texts and class discussions. I will provide a list of topics one week in advance of each paper's due date. If you wish to write on a topic not on the list, please come see me to discuss your proposed topic. If you wish to submit a paper in some other form (podcast, video, tumblr, etc), please see me, and we'll discuss it.

Papers are due by the start of the class period on the due date. For every 24-hour period that a paper is late, I will take 5 points off. That said, I am aware that life happens; if you feel you need an extension, please ask me as soon as possible. The earlier you ask, the more likely I am to give you an extension. Failure to turn in any one of the papers will result in failing the course.

Final (10%): There is a required final exam for this course. The exam will consist of a series of short answers as well as (possibly) one longer essay. Failure to take the final exam will result in failing the course.

Grading Scale:

A (90-100): An 'A' denotes exceptional skill and ability. An 'A' student demonstrates an excellent grasp of the material (i.e., the student understands the material enough to explain it succinctly and well), and also displays the ability to engage thoughtfully with both the broad issues and finer points under discussion.

B (80-89): A 'B' denotes solid-to-impressive skill and ability. A 'B' student demonstrates a good grasp of the material (i.e., the student understands the material well enough to explain it with few mistakes), and also displays the ability to engage thoughtfully with most, if not all, of the issues and points under discussion.

C (70-79): A 'C' denotes adequate skill and ability. A 'C' student demonstrates a fair grasp of the material (i.e., the student understands the big picture, but makes some serious errors in presentation), and also displays the ability to engage thoughtfully with at least some of the issues under discussion.

D (60-69): A 'D' denotes inadequate skill and ability. A 'D' student has serious problems with grasping the material, and fails to engage thoughtfully with any of the issues under discussion.

E (0-59): An 'E' denotes catastrophic problems in fulfilling the requirements of the course. An 'E' student neither grasps the material nor engages with it critically at any level.

While hard work is correlated with success, it is not sufficient for success. To get a good grade in this course, you need to not only understand and engage with the material, but also communicate your understanding and engagement to me via your participation, projects, and papers. If you sense that you are heading towards a grade you do not want, please come see me as soon as possible (if you wait until the end of the semester, it will be too late).

Assignments:

All readings, videos, podcasts, etc can be found on this course's Canvas site.

Week 1: Introduction + What is the Goal of Inquiry?

Monday, Aug 28th **Watch:** *12 Angry Men* (1957)

Wednesday, Aug 30th **Read:** Plato, “The Cave” excerpt from *The Republic*

Week 2: The Goal of Inquiry, continued

Monday, Sept 4th NO CLASS: LABOR DAY

Wednesday, Sept 6th **Listen:** Philosophy Bites Podcast, “Simon Blackburn on Plato's Cave”

Week 3: Truth: What is it?

Monday, Sept 11th **BLOG POST #1 DUE** and **Read:** Genesis 1 and 2

Wednesday, Sept 13th **Read:** “The Fox and the Crow,” “The Frogs Desiring a King,” and “The Bat, the Birds, and the Beasts,” *Aesop's Fables*

Week 4: Truth, continued

Monday, Sept 18th **Listen:** The British History Podcast, “Le Mort d'Arthur”

Wednesday, Sept 20th **PAPER #1 DUE** and **Read:** Neil Gaiman, “There Once Was a Girl and Her Uncle Sold Her,” *American Gods*

Week 5: Truth: Why Does it Matter?

Monday, Sept 25th **Read:** Robert Nozick, “The Experience Machine,” *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*

Wednesday, Sept 27th **Read:** Laura Parker, “The Anti-Vaccine Generation: How the Movement Against Shots Got Its Start,” *National Geographic*

Week 6: What is Knowledge?

Monday, Oct 2nd **BLOG POST #2 DUE** and **Read:** A.J. Ayer, “Knowing as Having the Right to be Sure,” *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings*

Wednesday, Oct 4th **Read:** Edmund Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?,” *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings*

Week 7: Gaining Knowledge Through Evidence

Monday, Oct 9th **Watch:** “Standing Up in the Milky Way,” *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey*

Wednesday, Oct 11th **PAPER #2 DUE** and **Read:** Sam Kean, *The Disappearing Spoon: And Other True Tales of Madness, Love, and the History of the World from the Periodic Table of the Elements*

Week 8: Knowledge and Evidence, continued

Monday, Oct 16th **Watch:** Michael Frayn, *Copenhagen* (1998) (**Watch the introduction.**)

Wednesday, Oct 18th **Watch:** Michael Frayn, *Copenhagen* (1998) (**Watch the movie.**)

Week 9: Skepticism: Worries About Evidence

Monday, Oct 23rd **BLOG POST #3 DUE** and **Read:** Descartes, Meditations I and II,
Meditations on First Philosophy

Wednesday, Oct 25th **Listen:** Philosophy Bites Podcast, “David Papineau on Scientific Realism”

Week 10: Skepticism, continued

Monday, Oct 30th **Read:** David Hume, excerpts from *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

Wednesday, Nov 1st **PAPER #3 DUE** and **Listen:** Examining Ethics Podcast, “Skepticism and
the Skeptical Skeptics Who Use It”

Week 11: Reasoning Well: Fallacies and Paradoxes

Monday, Nov 6th **Watch:** PBS Idea Channel, “Five Fallacies” and “Even More Fallacies!”

Wednesday, Nov 8th **Read:** Plato, *The Meno* (selections)

Week 12: Reasoning Well: Logical Thinking and Spheres of Argumentation

Monday, Nov 13th **BLOG POST #4 DUE** and **Read:** Thomas Aquinas, “5 Ways,” *Summa
Theologica*

Wednesday, Nov 15th **Read:** Stephen Jay Gould, “Nonoverlapping Magisteria”

Week 13: Argumentation, continued

Monday, Nov 20th **PAPER #4 DUE** and **Watch:** TED Talk, Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Is
religion good or bad? (This is a trick
question)”

Wednesday, Nov 22nd NO CLASS: THANKSGIVING BREAK

Week 14: Reasoning Well: Agendas and Biases

Monday, Nov 27th **Read:** Two accounts of Sojourner Truth's speech, “Ain't I a Woman”

Wednesday, Nov 29th **Listen:** Philosophy Bites Podcast, “Miranda Fricker on Epistemic Injustice”

Week 15: Reasoning Well: The Place of Faith

Monday, Dec 4th **Read:** Ryan Preston-Roedder, “Faith in Humanity,” *Philosophy and
Phenomenological Research*

Wednesday, Dec 6th

Review/Catch Up

Week 16: Final Exam Week

Monday, Dec 11th

FINAL EXAM: 11:00am-1:00pm, SCI 44

Code of Student Conduct:

All students at Siena Heights University are responsible for knowing and adhering to the academic integrity policy of this institution. For more information, please see the [Code of Student Conduct](#). Please obey the spirit as well as the law of SHU's Code of Student Conduct. If you think that something is in violation of the Code, it probably is, so check before doing it. Please remember that unintentional plagiarism is still plagiarism, and that **you must cite all of your sources** for papers!

****Please note:** every assignment turned in for this class must be your own original work, produced specifically *for this class*. You may not turn in an assignment written for a previous and/or different class. To do so would constitute (self) plagiarism, and will be treated as such.**

The Writing Center:

The Writing Center at Siena Heights University is a free resource available to all CAS students. Students are encouraged to visit the writing center for writing feedback at any stage in the writing process. For information regarding their tutors, hours, location, or to utilize their online links and resources, please visit writingcenter.sienaheights.edu.

Diversity and Disability Statement:

Our institution values diversity and inclusion; we are committed to a climate of mutual respect and full participation. Our goal is to create learning environments that are usable, equitable, inclusive and welcoming. If there are aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in barriers to your inclusion or accurate assessment or achievement, please notify the instructor as soon as possible. Students with disabilities are also welcome to contact the Office of Accessibility (517) 264-7683 or Laura Lyall (coordinator) at lyall@sienaheights.edu to discuss a range of options to removing barriers in the course, including accommodations. This process is initiated and driven by the student. It is to your advantage to begin the process in a timely manner, since accommodations are not retroactive. Grades earned before verification of a disability by the Office of Accessibility will not be changed.

Academic Engagement Policy:

In response to federal regulations governing financial aid, faculty will report students who are absent from class for one week without explanation. These students will be contacted to determine their current status. Students who are disengaged from a class for two weeks will be administratively withdrawn from that class and given a withdrawal grade equivalent to an E in grade point calculations. In order to avoid an administrative withdrawal, students can initiate a withdrawal themselves before the deadline (March 25) and avoid negative consequences to their grade points.

Sex- and Gender-based Violence and Harassment:

Title IX makes it clear that violence and harassment based on sex and gender is a Civil Rights offense subject to the same kinds of accountability and the same kinds of support applied to offenses against other protected categories such as race, national origin, etc. If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted for **any** reason, you can find the appropriate resources here:

- The SHU Counseling Center, directed by Sandy Morley, is open M-F from 8 am to 5 pm or by appointment. Sandy Morley is a confidential resource. You can reach her at 517-264-7193 or smorley@sienaheights.edu, or stop by Ledwidge Hall 195-197. Counseling services are offered at

no charge to University students.

- The SHU Public Safety Department can be reached at 517-264-7800 or by dialing 0 on campus. They are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and they offer 24-hour escort service to any location on campus. Cindy Birdwell is the Chief Public Safety Officer and she is also SHU's Title IX Coordinator. She can be reached at 517-264-7194 or cbirdwel@sienaheights.edu and her office is in Ledwidge 179.
- Campus Ministry is another valuable resource for students, no matter their faith tradition. Father John Grace is a confidential resource on campus. He can be reached at 517-264-7198 or jgrace@sienaheights.edu, and his office is located in the Campus Ministry Lounge in Ledwidge.

Syllabus Changes:

I reserve the right to make changes to this syllabus as appropriate. The odds that I'll do so during the semester are small, but if I do, I will inform you as soon as possible.