

Instructor: J. Neil Otte (jeffotte@buffalo.edu)
Class Room: #
Fall 20—
Office Hours:

PHILOSOPHY 115: CRITICAL THINKING

“It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it”—Aristotle

Course Description

Critical thinking is a field concerned with reasoning in everyday, real-life situations. By “reasoning,” I mean the act of coming to conclusions, making inferences, and evaluating arguments on the basis of reasons, principles, evidence, and facts. What we’re going to do in this course is pay attention to this feature of our behavior—a feature we use all the time, but rarely as consciously as we are now going to attempt. We all have experience with reasoning poorly and reasoning well; in this course, it is our task to look at what reasoning well amounts to, to master what tools might help us, and to learn how to avoid reasoning poorly. We do this because we’re interested not only in convincing other people that our ideas are correct, but because we are concerned with, in fact, *being* correct, and we ensure this best by only allowing ourselves to be convinced by the best arguments.

Whereas many people like to think they are critical thinkers, it’s actually quite a difficult skill to acquire. Acquiring it in this class is made doubly hard by the limited amount of time we have—a mere three weeks. For this reason, every day, you will need to spend a few hours with me, working hard in class, and an equal amount of time reading and studying outside of class: for a total of four to five hours. You will need to have read, prepared, and be ready for new information each day, making good study skills and time management essential. If you can do this, then you’ll do well here, and the skills you acquire will provide you with a solid foundation for studying symbolic logic and be broadly helpful to all aspects of decision-making in your everyday life.

Required Readings

Deborah Bennett, *Logic Made Easy*
Anthony Weston, *A Rulebook for Arguments* (4th Edition)
For further readings: See Course Documents on BlackBoard

Course Outcomes

When you leave this course, you should be able to extract arguments from prose; identify the parts of an argument and the structure of an argument; clearly distinguish truth, justification, and consistency; have a grasp on deductive validity and inductive cogency; understand and be able to identify logically valid argument forms; and be able to identify common fallacies.

This course will also ask you to take on a certain kind of attitude and perspective. It will encourage you to be aware of your own biases and prejudices, to be curious before passing judgment, to try to be as objective and open-minded as possible before giving an opinion, and to have a sensitivity to the way language can obscure a position or mislead an audience. Together, we’re going to strive to be *open-minded* and admit when we’re wrong or don’t know; *curious* about the views of others, even when we think we’re right; *imaginative* in looking at a topic from all angles; *self-aware* of our own biases and influences; *objective* in letting the evidence lead us instead of leading the evidence where we want it to go; and *intellectually honest* by always attempting to be charitable to the views of others.

COURSE GOALS	METHOD OF EVALUATION
Demonstrate comprehension of basic concepts in critical thinking	Weekly Online Quizzes and Exams
Actively analyze and critique textual arguments	Online participation
Develop clear, original criticisms of the arguments and positions we read.	Assignments, Papers

Grade by Percentage

50%	Participation, Assignments, and Quizzes
25%	Exam 1
25%	Exam 2

Grading Scale

A = 92-100%
A- = 90-91%
B+ = 88-89%
B = 82-87%
B- = 80-81%
C+ = 78-79%
C = 72-77%
C- = 70-71%
D+ = 68-69%
D = 60-67%
F = 59% and below

Online Reading Quizzes

Every article we read will be accompanied by an online reading quiz. These quizzes are meant to ensure that you are reading carefully, and to help you focus on the main issues and arguments in the text. Some quizzes may ask you to provide a definition from the text, while others might ask you to spell out the author's argument in your own words.

Examinations

There will be two exams: a midterm and a final. These will cover only the material within those periods. A week in advance, you will receive a list of possible short answer essay questions (twenty to twenty-five questions). You will need to prepare answers to these, and I recommend you work with others. On the day of the exams, you will not be able to use any preparation. The exams will present you with five of the possible questions from the list and you will need to answer four (i.e. you will need to choose one answer to leave blank). This means each answer will be worth 25% points. Answers should be clear, concise, and complete.

Accessibility Resources

Students who require accommodation should contact me within the first three days of the session, so that we can make appropriate arrangements with the accessibility office. To contact Accessibility Resources, please follow [this link](#).

Academic Honesty

As the world is increasingly online, it has become very easy to present the words and ideas of others as our own. This can be particularly tempting in an online course like this. *Resist this temptation*. All student work may be scanned by online plagiarism checkers, which are remarkably good at catching plagiarized work. Students who are discovered to have plagiarized will be dealt with according to the university's academic integrity policy. In particular, no work that includes plagiarism will be graded or allowed to be made up, and evidence of plagiarism may be grounds for filing a report with the academic integrity office. It is your responsibility to know what plagiarism is and to avoid it. There will be no exceptions. To educate yourself on what counts as plagiarism, please visit [this link](#) or reach out to me if you have specific questions. For more information on the University at Buffalo's policy on academic integrity, visit [this link](#).

Why Philosophy

I find a majority of students love philosophy, but increasingly, I encounter students who forego majoring because they are worried about paying student loans and getting a job. Contrary to their reputation, philosophy undergraduates do very well on the job market compared to many other majors. See [this link](#) for further information about pursuing philosophy. You don't need to choose between studying what you love and getting a job.