

Section 1: Tue/Thu 9:00-10:15 am

Location : UH – 1204

Instructor: Vias C. Nicolaides, M.A.

Teaching Assistant: Jessica Dunn

Instructor Office hours: Robinson B Room 213

Tue/Thu 3:00 - 4:00

and by appointment

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Instructor Phone: 703-993-3706

**Course goals:** This synthesis course is designed to allow upper-level undergraduates to practice critical thinking by engaging in conversations and debates on provocative topics that impact the world we live in. In addition, a second goal is for students to sharpen their teamwork skills, since students will form and work partly in teams.

Each individual's final grade will depend on both individual and team performance. A third goal is to teach students how to conduct proper research on various topics and not fall prey to emotional appeals, speculations, and fallacies. Learning and differentiating what is speculation and what is valid is a central tenet of the course. A final goal is to increase understanding of the person and how it is viewed from a psychological scientific standpoint.

**Required reading:** All course readings will be made available online by the course instructor. Students will also have a chance to search and find readings that they will share with the class as a whole.

**Grading:** The final grade will consist of the following weighted components:

Team Debate Research paper	20%	
Main Debate – presentation ( <i>team &amp; individual</i> )	20%	(10% + 10%)
Practice debates ( <i>team &amp; individual</i> )	20%	(10% + 10%)
Class Notes on Discussed Topics ( <i>individual</i> )	20%	
Final Exam	20%	

**General Class Format:** This class is different from other typical classes you have taken! For one, it seeks to put the student in charge and overall grants control to the learner. The format of our class will be as follows: To increase motivation and interest the instructor will allow students to choose their debate topics from a list covering various aspects of psychology. This will take place during the first week of class. In turn, when it is time to discuss the topics, **both the instructor and the students will research the topics** and come to class ready to discuss their findings from scientific and popular press literatures as well as express their thoughts on these topics. The instructor will have a facilitative role in promoting critical thinking and student engagement. Sometimes a short lecture may start off the class.

Later on in the course, students will be called to engage in practice and main debates.

There will be four practice debates and four main debates, thus a total of 8 topics. Some possible topics are Immigration Reform (Good or Bad for the workplace), Children playing violent games (Good or bad for children), Genetic Modification of the unborn, Abortion, Capital punishment, Computers replacing teachers, etc. The instructor will provide a list of topics for students to choose. The instructor is also open to other recommendations made by students provided they are in line with the goals of the course.

Given that the debate topics will set the stage for reading assignments, the course readings will be announced both orally and in writing after the class as a whole has chosen its preferred debate topics.

**Debates:** Students will form four-person teams and participate in one practice debate and one concluding debate, with individual and team performance graded by the instructor. Debates will be competitive with the end goal of persuading the class as a whole.

Practice and main debate grades will be composed of five, equally-weighted parts. As a debater, you will be graded on clarity, quality of arguments used, sources used, quality of responses to counter-arguments, and overall flow. The criteria will be further discussed in class.

During the debates students not debating will serve as audience members, taking careful notes and evaluating the debaters. At the end, audience students will indicate which debating teams have persuaded them as well as turn in their individual notes to the instructor.

As stated, a central tenet of the program is to promote critical thinking based on science related findings and “truths”. Apart from the available readings, students will be required to search and find **valid** information pertaining to their debates. We will cover in class the various avenues of scientific research and how to properly conduct it.

It is always important to arrive on time, but it is critical on debate days. With just a few minutes to present an opening argument, a classmate’s late arrival could disrupt a debater’s presentation and affect his or her grade. Therefore, please plan on being on time to class.

**Absences:** In general debates cannot be rescheduled except in cases of serious, unavoidable, and documented circumstances that are clearly beyond the student’s ability to control. Note that it will not be possible to make up debate participation as a debater or an audience member, although in unusual circumstances that meet the above criteria, it may be possible to weight other course elements more heavily to compensate, in part, for missed work.

If you find that you must miss a substantial number of classes, for any reason, I encourage you to consult the catalog or contact your academic dean’s office for information on withdrawing from a course, including late and selective withdrawal policies and procedures.

**Team Research Paper:** Teams will turn in one research paper concerning their main debate topic. Details of how the research paper should be structured and what should it contain will be elaborated further in class. Furthermore, we will cover in class how to engage in successful teamwork.

**Final Exam:** The final exam will be cumulative and contain questions from various areas that have been in class (e.g., psychology of persuasion, argumentation, fallacies, etc.). More details will be given in class.

**Technology expectations:** All students are expected to maintain and regularly access their Mason e-mail accounts. If you are having your Mason mail forwarded to another account, please ensure that your Mason account doesn’t exceed the assigned limit, causing mail to bounce back to the sender.

**Attendance and decorum:** Class attendance is not recorded, but it is important for students who want to do well to be in class, prepared, and attentive. In addition to other important information, extra credit opportunities may be announced in class and may often consist of in-class participation. Preparation for class includes completing readings by coming to class ready to discuss interesting topics. Lectures and debates will be more interesting and more meaningful for students who have done the reading in advance. In order to be attentive, you should not engage in any multi-tasking activities during class – that means no texting, e-mail, web surfing, doing homework for other classes, etc. Please turn off all cell phones and other potential sources of disruption at the start of class. During class, laptops may only be used for taking notes. If you must arrive late or leave early, please do so as quietly as possible and be considerate of your classmates by sitting near an exit.

**Disability accommodations:** If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me early in the semester. If you have not already done so, contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) at 703-993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through that office. Please keep in mind that it might not be possible to grant last-minute requests for accommodations, so it is important to make all arrangements well before the date when the accommodation is needed.

**Honor code:** All students are expected to be familiar with, and abide by, the University Honor Code. As required by the Honor Code, all suspected violations will be reported. The instructor for this course reserves the right to enter a failing grade to any student found guilty of an honor code violation.

**Important dates:**     Last day to add a class – September 6  
                                 Last day to drop a class – September 30  
                                 Last day for a selective withdrawal – October 28

**Enrollment:** Every student is responsible for verifying correct enrollment. Graded work will not be returned to students who are not officially enrolled.

**Disclaimer:** The instructor reserves the right to change the syllabus and its content. Any changes will be announced orally and in writing.

Date	Details
30-Aug	Introduction to Our Class
1-Sep	Presentation and Selection of Debate Topics
6-Sep	Team Formation, Selection of Topics, How to Successfully Work Together
8-Sep	The Psychology of Persuasion
13-Sep	The Psychology of Persuasion
15-Sep	Conducting Scientific Research and Backing Up Arguments
20-Sep	Critical Thinking and Avoiding Fallacies
22-Sep	Team Research Paper Guidelines and Debate Criteria
27-Sep	The Psychology of Practice Debate Topic # 1 & Class Discussion
29-Sep	The Psychology of Practice Debate Topic # 2 & Class Discussion
4-Oct	The Psychology of Practice Debate Topic # 3 & Class Discussion
6-Oct	The Psychology of Practice Debate Topic # 4 & Class Discussion & Topic Selection
11-Oct	<i>No class due to Columbus Day recess</i>
13-Oct	The Psychology of Main Debate # 1 & Class Discussion
18-Oct	The Psychology of Main Debate # 2 & Class Discussion
20-Oct	The Psychology of Main Debate # 3 & Class Discussion
25-Oct	The Psychology of Main Debate # 4 & Class Discussion & Topic Selection
27-Oct	<i>No class – debate teams meet to discuss roles, plan cross-examination, etc.</i>
1-Nov	Practice Debate # 1
3-Nov	Practice Debate # 2
8-Nov	Practice Debate # 3
10-Nov	Practice Debate # 4
15-Nov	<i>No class – debate teams meet to discuss roles, plan cross-examination, etc.</i>
17-Nov	<b>Team Debate Research Paper Due</b>
22-Nov	Main Debate # 1
24-Nov	<i>Thanksgiving Brake</i>
29-Nov	Main Debate # 2
1-Dec	Main Debate # 3
6-Dec	Main Debate # 4
8-Dec	Revision for Final, Q &A
13-Dec	Reading Days
15-Dec	<b>Final Exam, 7:30am - 10:15am @ UH-1204</b>