**PSYC 405-DL1 Mystery, Madness & Murder**

**Spring 2021**

**Instructor**: Farah Bader

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**Office Hours**: By appointment only

**Office Location:** virtual via Zoom or Google Meet

**Course description:** In this asynchronous online course, we will review the evidence for, and against, some popular extraordinary beliefs and the conviction of a “murderer”. A major goal will involve fostering critical thinking and open-minded skepticism. Individual critical thinkers (and true skeptics) can reach different conclusions about complex topics, so information will be presented as objectively as possible. That is, the focus will not be on “debunking”, but on considering various source materials in the context of current scientific knowledge. Students will be expected to develop and defend their own, individual opinions after carefully weighing the evidence.

**Learning objectives/outcomes:**

By the end of this course, you will be able to:

* Distinguish among three different types of evidence: empirical, correlational, and anecdotal
* Identify the relative strengths and weaknesses of each kind of evidence
* Recognize many of the challenges to critical thinking, especially as they relate to cognitive biases
* Critically evaluate evidence related to some popular extraordinary beliefs
* Apply good critical thinking skills to any topic you encounter in the future

Also, note that this a Mason core synthesis course that is designed to allow upper-level undergraduates to practice critical thinking by engaging in conversations and debates on a variety of current, interdisciplinary topics with far-reaching social and ethical implications. Assigned readings and the independent research required for engaged participation will utilize and expand on research, communication, and writing skills acquired in other courses.

**Required texts/access:**

Mayer, E. L. (2008). *Extraordinary knowing: Science, skepticism, and the inexplicable powers of the human mind.* New York, NY: Bantam.

Taylor, G. (2013). *Stop Worrying! There probably is an afterlife.* New York, NY: Daily Grail.

*Fallon, James (2014) The Psychopath Inside: A Neuroscientist’s Personal Journey into the Dark Side of the Brain.* New York, New York: Penguin Group

Netflix access is also required to watch the documentary series *The Staircase.* A free-trial subscription can be obtained.

**Grading:** There will be no formal exams in this course. You will demonstrate what you’ve learned by completing a series of activities, projects, and writing assignments.

Graded work will involve varying amounts of preparation and effort (and graded course components are weighted accordingly), but all will require you to engage seriously and substantively with the course material. Detailed instructions for assignments will be provided on Blackboard.

**Final grade:** Your final grade will be based on the number of points you have earned of the 130 possible following the grading scale below. Grading breakdown with assignments can be found on the schedule.

**Grading Scale**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Numerical Grade** | **Letter** | **Class Points Needed** |
| **90%-100%** | **A** | **117-130** |
| **87%-89%** | **B+** | **113-116** |
| **80%-86%** | **B** | **104-112** |
| **77%-79%** | **C+** | **100-103** |
| **70%-76%** | **C** | **91-99** |
| **60%-69%** | **D** | **78-90** |
| **59%-Lower** | **F** | **0-77** |

**Modules:** As an online course, the content of PSYC 405 will be delivered in modules. These can be found under **Psych405 Course Modules**. For our purposes, each module which may last one to a couple of weeks will begin on Monday and end the following Sunday night at midnight. Information about specific due dates will be noted in assignment instructions.

I realize that some of you may be in different time zones. All dates and times listed on the course schedule and Blackboard are based on the time at the Mason campus in Fairfax, Virginia (Eastern U.S. Daylight Savings Time).

**Late work policy:**  In most circumstances, assignments are not accepted late. If you experience an unavoidable personal or family emergency which prevents you from submitting work on time, follow these steps for late work to be considered:

1. Email me *immediately* with all of the work you have done so far on the assignment attached. This is to ensure you are not asking for an extension because you have not yet started the assignment.
2. Email me all documentation you have to prove the severity of your situation (e.g. doctor’s note, copy of obituary, photos of car accident, etc.)
3. Prepare to have the work completed within a timely manner. Students will be given an extension between 1-7 days from the original due date depending on the situation. Failure to submit work by the new deadline will result in a 0.

**STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES**

**Technology expectations:**  You must have reliable access to the internet. Internet service failure is not an acceptable excuse for late work. If you are uncertain about your home service, consider uploading your work to Blackboard at one of the Mason campuses.

You will need to be able to access your Masonlive email account [(http://itservices.gmu.edu/services/view-service.cfm?customel\_dataPageID\_4609=11028](http://itservices.gmu.edu/services/view-service.cfm?customel_dataPageID_4609=11028)), and Blackboard [(https://mymasonportal.gmu.edu](https://mymasonportal.gmu.edu/)), Mason’s web-based Learning Management System.

Information about a variety of course tools, including Blackboard Mobile, can be found at <http://doit.gmu.edu/students/course-tools/>

**Email response time:** In general, you can expect responses from me within 48 hours. I expect that you will respond to my emails within a similar time frame.

**Civility:** In this course, we will be covering topics about which people are likely to have differing opinions. Disagreement is fine and, in fact, it advances our thinking to consider other viewpoints and perspectives. However, I expect that disagreement will be respectful. Part of civil disagreement involves focusing on ideas, rather than people. For example, it is generally better to say “I disagree with your **conclusions** about …”, rather than “I disagree with **you** about …”

I also expect that emails, responses to post, etc., will include a salutation and a closing. For example, “Dear Jane”, “Hi Jane”, or something similar to begin (“Hey” is not appropriate here), and “Best wishes”, “Cordially”, or something similar to end. **All communications should also be signed with your full name (first and last because a few people may have the same name).** ***Also, please be sure to indicate in the subject line that it is Psych 405***

**Official communications via GMU e-mail:** Mason uses electronic mail to provide official information to students. Examples include communications from course instructors, notices from the library, notices about academic standing, financial aid information, class materials, assignments, questions, and instructor feedback. Students are responsible for the content of university communications sent to their Mason e-mail account, and are required to activate that account and check it regularly. 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.

**OTHER IMPORTANT INFORMATION**

**Disability accommodations:**  If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please let me know 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. The Office of Disability Services website can be found at [http://ods.gmu.edu](http://ods.gmu.edu/)

**Academic integrity:** The integrity of the University community is affected by the individual choices made by each of us. Mason has an Honor Code with clear guidelines regarding academic integrity. Three fundamental principles to follow at all times are: (1) all work submitted be your own; (2) when using the work or ideas of others, including fellow students, give full credit through accurate citations; and (3) if you are uncertain about the ground rules on a particular assignment, ask for clarification.

No grade is important enough to justify academic misconduct. Plagiarism means using the exact words, opinions, or factual information from another person without giving the person credit. Writers give credit through accepted documentation styles, such as parenthetical citation, footnotes, or endnotes. Paraphrased material must also be cited, using APA format. A simple listing of books or articles is not sufficient. Plagiarism is the equivalent of intellectual robbery and cannot be tolerated in the academic setting. If you have any doubts about what constitutes plagiarism, please contact me.

More information on Mason’s Honor Code can be found at <http://oai.gmu.edu/the-mason-honor-code-2/>

Mason’s Writing Center provides detailed information about plagiarism, APA citation style, and more at <http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/writing-resources/wc-quick-guides>

**Diversity:** George Mason University promotes a living and learning environment for outstanding growth and productivity among its students, faculty and staff. Through its curriculum, programs, policies, procedures, services and resources, Mason strives to maintain a quality environment for work, study and personal growth.

An emphasis upon diversity and inclusion throughout the campus community is essential to achieve these goals. Diversity is broadly defined to include such characteristics as, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, disability, and sexual orientation. Diversity also entails different viewpoints, philosophies, and perspectives. Attention to these aspects of diversity will help promote a culture of inclusion and belonging, and an environment where diverse opinions, backgrounds, and practices have the opportunity to be voiced, heard and respected.

**Student support resources:** A variety of useful services for distance learners are listed at <http://masononline.gmu.edu/student-resources/>

**Important dates:** Last day to add a class – **Mon. Feb. 1st**

Last day to drop a class (50% Refund) – **Tues. Feb. 16th**

Unrestricted Withdrawal Period – **Wed. Feb. 17- Mon. Mar 1**

Selective Withdrawal Period (100% tuition liability) – **Tues. Mar 2 –Thurs. Apr 1**

**PSYC 405-DL1: Mystery, Madness & Murder**

**SPRING 2021**

| **ASSESSMENT** | **Points toward final grade** | **Due Date** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **MODULE 1 – Intro to Critical Thinking – January 25 to January 31st** | | |
| 1.1 Response to course orientation | 1 | 1/31 |
| 1.2 Introduction and responses to two classmates | 6 | 1/31 |
| 1.3 Logical fallacies quiz | 4 | 1/31 |
| 1.4 Thoughts and reactions reflective essay | 10 | 1/31 |
| **MODULE 2 – Types of Evidence & Evaluating Data – February 1 to February 14** | | |
| 2.1 Discussion board on either *I was Attacked by a Reptilian or More Strange Sightings (choose one) (Be sure to respond to another student’s post as well)* | 10 | 2/15 |
| 2.4 Analysis of selected anecdotal account | 4 | 2/15 |
| 2.5 Pre-class surveys | 1 | 2/15 |
| 2.6 Survey evaluation | 1 | 2/15 |
| 2.7 Opinion on the value of science in assessing extraordinary beliefs | 10 | 2/15 |
| **MODULE 3 – Psychic Phenomena – February 15 to February 28th** | | |
| 3.1 Pendulum experiment | 1 | 2/28 |
| 3.2 Zener card experiment | 1 | 2/28 |
| 3.3 Critical review of *Extraordinary Knowing* | 10 | 2/28 |
| **MODULE 4 TBA–– March 1 to March 14** | | |
| 4.2 Critical Review of Serial Podcast | 10 | 3/14 |
| 4.3 Critical review of *The Psychopath Inside* | 10 | 3/14 |
| **MODULE 5 – Murder: Did He Do It? March 15 to March 28** | | |
| 5.1 Evaluating injustices in our justice system | 5 | 3/28 |
| 5.2 The Staircase: did he do it? | 5 | 3/28 |
| 5.3 Critical review of *The Staircase* | 10 | 3/28 |
| **MODULE 6 – The Survival of Consciousness – March 29 to April 11** | | |
| 6.1 EVP experiment | 1 | 4/11 |
| 6.2 Reality television evaluation | 5 | 4/11 |
| 6.3 Critical review of *Stop Worrying!* | 10 | 4/11 |
| **MODULE 7 – Concluding Thoughts – April 12 to May 3rd** | | |
| 7.1 Annotated bibliography | 1 | 5/3 |
| 7.2 In the news | 1 | 5/3 |
| 7.3 Post-class survey | 1 | 5/3 |
| 7.4 Final reflection | 12 | 5/3 |
| **TOTAL POINTS POSSIBLE** | 130 |  |