

**PSYC405-002: Mystery, Madness & Murder**  
**Fall 2022**

**Instructor:** Lawrence Minnis, M.A.  
**E-mail:** [lminnis@gmu.edu](mailto:lminnis@gmu.edu)  
**Office hours:** by appointment

**COURSE INFORMATION**

**Prerequisites:** Psyc100 or permission of instructor

**Course goals:** In this course, we will review the evidence for, and against, some popular extraordinary beliefs and examine psychological principles underlying violence and the conviction of a murderer. Major goals include fostering critical thinking, open-minded skepticism, and evaluating different types of evidence. The course will be split up into 3 sections.

The first section will cover principles of psychology and psychopathology in relation to rage, aggression, and violence across topics fictional (Batman, Incredible Hulk, and Clyde Shelton) and non-fictional (Lee Boyd Malvo) subjects. We will enhance critical thinking skills by discussing backgrounds, findings, and opinions related to each.

The second section of the course will shift gears to cover anomalistic phenomena and parapsychology. We will explore and discuss arguments and suggested evidence related to the survival of consciousness (i.e., near-death experiences, reincarnation, ghosts/apparitions).

The third section will consist of student group presentations and final discussions to wrap up the semester.

**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
- Recognize many of the challenges to critical thinking, especially as they relate to cognitive biases
- Apply strong critical thinking skills to any topic you encounter in the future

**Required readings:** Books are available in new and used paperback copies, as well as e-books, through online sellers like Google or Amazon.

Albarus, C., & Mack, J. (2012). *The Making of Lee Boyd Malvo*. Columbia University Press.

Allely, C. S. (2020). *The Psychology of Extreme Violence: A Case Study Approach to Serial Homicide, Mass Shooting, School Shooting and Lone-actor Terrorism*. Routledge.

Rosenberg, R. S., & Canzoneri, J. (2008). *The Psychology of Superheroes: An Unauthorized Exploration*. Benbella Books, Inc.

**Grading:** There will be no formal exams in this course. You will demonstrate what you've learned by participating in discussions and completing writing assignments and projects, according to the breakdown below.

Discussion Participation	Writing Assignments	Essay	Group Presentation
<b>20%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>40%</b>

Graded work will involve varying amounts of preparation and effort (and 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, along with grading rubrics that allow you to see the relative weight of the various components of each assignment. You must participate in at least six (6) discussion board posts, consisting of a thread submission and three (3) peer replies for each discussion on Blackboard.

Late projects will only be accepted with advance permission, and a penalty will be assessed for each calendar day the project is late, up to five (5) days late. After five days, late submissions will not be accepted.

**Final grade:** Your final grade will be based on the number of points you have earned out of the 120 possible. A standard grading structure will be used:

A+ 97% and higher	B+ 87-89%	C+ 77-79%	F 59% and lower
A 93-96%	B 83-86%	C 70-76%	
A- 90-92%	B- 80-82%	D 60-69%	

## STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES

**Technology expectations:** You must have reliable access to the internet. Please plan to submit work well in advance of deadlines so you'll have time to respond to any computer or WIFI challenges.

You will need to be able to access your Masonlive email account ([http://itservices.gmu.edu/services/view-service.cfm?custome1\\_dataPageID\\_4609=11028](http://itservices.gmu.edu/services/view-service.cfm?custome1_dataPageID_4609=11028)), and Blackboard (<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/>

**Response times:** In general, you can expect email or online responses from me within 48 hours. I expect that you will respond to my emails within a similar time frame.

Please be patient about grading since this is a large class with substantive assignments.

**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 posts, 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 name (first names are fine unless it turns out we have duplicates, in which case "Jane D." or "Jane W." will work).

**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.

**Cancellations:** University closings will not typically affect this online course, however if inclement weather or other unexpected situations affect your ability to complete graded work on time, please contact me to discuss options.

## 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>

**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 must 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.

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/>

<b>Deadlines:</b>	Last day to add a class	August 29 <sup>th</sup>
	Last day to drop (100% refund)	September 6 <sup>th</sup>
	Last day to drop (50% refund)	September 13 <sup>th</sup>
	Unrestricted withdrawal period	September 14 <sup>th</sup> – 27 <sup>th</sup>
	Selective withdrawal period	September 28 <sup>th</sup> – October 24 <sup>th</sup>

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

**PSYC405-001 or 002: Mystery, Madness & Murder**

	Date	Topic	Materials	Task / Assignment
Week 1	22-Aug	Intro to Course - Syllabus Overview	Syllabus	Read syllabus; Introduction post in BB Discussion Board
	24-Aug	Critical Thinking	Facione, 1998; Ballin et al., 1999	
Week 2	29-Aug	Critical Thinking / Perception and Bias	Bar-Anan et al., 2009	Discussion Board Posts
	31-Aug	Perception and Bias / Uncertainty		Writing Assignment
Week 3	5-Sep	No Class - Labor Day		Discussion Board Posts
	7-Sep	Evaluating Evidence		
Week 4	12-Sep	Rage, Aggression and Violence (Batman)	Psychology of Superheroes: Appetite for Destruction	Discussion Board Posts
	14-Sep	Rage, Aggression and Violence (Incredible Hulk)	Psychology of Superheroes: The Incredible Hulk	Discussion Board Posts
Week 5	19-Sep	Rage, Aggression and Violence (Law Abiding Citizen, 2009)	Psychology of Extreme Violence: Chapters 2 & 6	Watch movie; Discussion Board Posts
	21-Sep	Rage, Aggression and Violence (Law Abiding Citizen, 2009)		
Week 6	26-Sep	Rage, Aggression and Violence (D.C. Sniper)	The Making of Lee Boyd Malvo: Chapter 4	Essay assigned on Sep. 26
	28-Sep	Rage, Aggression and Violence (D.C. Sniper)		
Week 7	3-Oct	Rage, Aggression and Violence	Bem, 2011	
	5-Oct	Parapsychology Introduction and Overview		
Week 8	10-Oct	No Class - Fall Break	Rousseau, 2012; Parnia, 2014	Essay due NLT Oct. 12
	11-Oct	Survival of Consciousness - Near Death		Group Project Assigned by Oct. 12
	12-Oct	Survival of Consciousness - Near Death		
Week 9	17-Oct	Survival of Consciousness - Reincarnation		Discussion Board Posts/ Writing Assignment
	19-Oct	Survival of Consciousness		
Week 10	24-Oct	Survival of Consciousness - Ghost/Spirits/Apparitions	Block, 2020; Leary, 2016	Discussion Board Posts
	26-Oct	Survival of Consciousness		
Week 11	31-Oct	Unidentified Entities and Unexplained Phenomena	Irwin et al., 2018	
	2-Nov	Unidentified Entities and Unexplained Phenomena		
Week 12	7-Nov	Group Presentations - Prep		
	9-Nov	Group Presentations		
Week 13	14-Nov	Group Presentations		
	16-Nov	Group Presentations		
Week 14	21-Nov	Group Presentations		

	23-Nov	No Class - Thanksgiving Break
Week 15	28-Nov	Group Presentations
	30-Nov	Final Thoughts on Critical Thinking and Course Topics