

**PSY 311-03**  
**CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN PSYCHOLOGY – ONLINE EDITION**

Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, 10:00 – 10:50 a.m.  
(see our course schedule for virtual class dates)

**Instructor: Brian Bowdle, Ph.D.**

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Virtual Office Hours: by appointment

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**Course Description**

This course offers a series of critical thinking and communication exercises as ways of exploring current psychological controversies. A wide range of such controversies will be discussed, including ongoing debates within the field of psychology, theoretical disagreements between psychology and neighboring disciplines, and contentious social issues that evoke competing perspectives on human nature. After successfully completing the course, students should be able to (a) identify areas of psychological controversy and explain their significance; (b) recognize the moral and ethical dimensions of such controversies; (c) critically evaluate opposing theoretical arguments, both logically and empirically, in order to form their own reasoned judgments; (d) conduct background research on complex topics in a balanced and systematic manner; and (e) express ideas clearly, persuasively, and professionally in writing. This course is worth three credits.

**Required Books**

Keith E. Stanovich (2018) – *How to Think Straight about Psychology* (11<sup>th</sup> edition)

Carol Tavis and Elliot Aronson (2020) – *Mistakes Were Made (but Not by Me)* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition)

Julian Baggini (2011) – *The Ego Trick*

Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt (2018) – *The Coddling of the American Mind*

Jesse Bering (2013) – *Perv*

Thomas Chatterton Williams (2019) – *Self-Portrait in Black and White*

These six books, which are listed here in the order we will be covering them, constitute the intellectual core of this course. Everyone is expected to keep up with the readings – and to come to class prepared to discuss any chapters that are assigned for that day (see the course schedule at the end of this syllabus for the dates of our chapter assignments).

**Blackboard**

Our Blackboard website is an essential component of this course. In addition to serving as the platform for our virtual class meetings (see below), Blackboard will be used to complete and submit all of our assignments. Class announcements, course documents, and grades will also be posted on this website. And I will be using Blackboard to send out emails to members of this class, which means that you should regularly check the messages on your GVSU student email account.

**Virtual Class Meetings**

Although this is a MWF class, we will not have virtual class meetings three times a week, every week, throughout the semester. Some weeks we will meet twice, some only once, and some not at all – see our course schedule for details. However, these class meetings will be an important venue for our ongoing conversations about various controversial issues, and I expect you to attend all of them.

We will be using Blackboard Collaborate Ultra as the platform for our class meetings. Ideally, you should have reliable access to high-speed internet and a device with both a webcam and a microphone in order to fully participate in these meetings. If you have concerns about any of these technological requirements, contact me so that we can discuss your options.

In order to attend any of our class meetings, go to Blackboard and click the Virtual Classroom tab in the course menu. This will take you to the Blackboard Collaborate Ultra page. Once you are there, look for the day's Class Session folder, open it, and click the Join Session button. This will take you to our meeting. (If you are asked for permission to turn on your camera and microphone, please allow for these options – I would prefer to be able to see and hear all of you during class!)

Please note that I will not be recording any of our meetings.

### **Course Evaluation**

The maximum number of points you can receive in this course is 210, and point totals will be translated into grades at the end of the term using this scale:

195 – 210 points = A	153 – 160 points = C
188 – 194 points = A-	146 – 152 points = C-
182 – 187 points = B+	140 – 145 points = D+
174 – 181 points = B	132 – 139 points = D
167 – 173 points = B-	125 – 131 points = D-
161 – 166 points = C+	124 points or less = F

Grades will be cumulatively determined by the following:

**Opening Survey.** Sometime between now and the end of Wednesday, September 2, you should complete the opinion survey I have posted on our Blackboard site. You can access it by clicking the Opening Survey tab in the course menu. This survey is worth 5 points.

**Book Forums.** The development of critical thinking is in many ways a social enterprise, requiring thoughtful interactions with other individuals whose perceptions, experiences, and beliefs may differ from your own. Therefore, you are expected to participate in a series of online discussion forums, which can be accessed on our Blackboard site via the Book Forums page. To be more specific, there will be five different book forums, each revolving around one of our first five books (*How to Think Straight About Psychology*; *Mistakes Were Made*; *The Ego Trick*; *The Coddling of the American Mind*; and *Perv*). **For each of these forums, you should plan on making 15 thoughtful and substantial (100 words or more) contributions.** At least one – but no more than three - of these 15 contributions must be an original item posted as a new thread. Think of these original posts as “conversation starters” in which you raise interesting questions about and/or share your personal reactions to material from the book at hand. The remaining 12 to 14 (out of 15) contributions you make to each forum must be responses to other people’s messages.

I (your instructor) will also be starting threads and posting responses in all of our book forums, but please don’t wait for me to raise particular issues if you’d like to start discussing them. These online conversations should be treated as belonging to all of us.

Here are some additional guidelines for using the book forums:

- 1) Make sure that your contributions to each forum stay “on topic” by relating them to the contents of the book. This will still allow for plenty of flexibility in terms of what you can write about, of course – not only do all of our books cover lots of conceptual territory, but the various twists and turns of our in-class discussions of these books are also fair game for your posts. Moreover, if you can find interesting ways of relating the issues covered in one of our books to current events, to personal experiences, and/or to material you have discussed in other courses here at GVSU, I encourage you to write about these things as well.
- 2) Each one of our five book forums will have a limited window of availability – it will appear three days prior to our first scheduled in-class discussion of the relevant book, will remain active across all of the meetings devoted to that book, and will disappear three days after our last scheduled in-class discussion of the book. Once a forum has disappeared, you can no longer post to it.

- 3) Because these forums will work best if everyone in the class remains actively engaged in the discussions as they evolve from day to day, there are three “milestone dates” for each forum, by which points you are expected to have made a certain number of contributions. If your posts do not keep up with these contribution due dates, you will lose points. See our course schedule for details.
- 4) Avoid starting new threads on the very last day a book forum is available. Otherwise, many of your classmates may not have enough time to consider your contribution and post thoughtful responses before the forum disappears.
- 5) Avoid redundancy. It is fine to create a new thread about a topic that others have discussed, but make sure that the content of your post brings something new to the table, as opposed to simply recasting a question that has already been asked or an observation that has already been made.
- 6) Although I expect most of your contributions to be substantial (100 words or more), relatively short (one- or two-sentence) posts are by no means forbidden, and may often be useful if you are moved to continue a discussion in a thoughtful manner. For instance, if you'd like someone to clarify a point they just made, do not feel like you have to compose a 100-word message asking for clarification when a 10-word question would serve the purpose.
- 7) Because these forums are “threaded,” please make sure that your responses are posted appropriately. That is, if you are responding to a specific message, post your response as a reply to that message, and not as a reply to a different message or as a new thread.
- 8) I am allowing people to subscribe to specific threads in our book forums, and I encourage you to do so for any thread you have created or engaged with. This way, if someone (who might be me) questions or challenges something you have posted, you won't be at risk of blowing them (or me) off by not realizing you have been invited to respond. (A word to the wise: As an instructor, I tend not to take kindly to being blown off by students, so DO reply to me if I ask you something in response to one of your posts.)
- 9) And finally, I expect the tone of our book forums to be respectful and courteous throughout. It is perfectly fine to express different (and perhaps even “unpopular”) viewpoints, and to openly disagree with others, but insulting or antagonistic posts have no place in these forums and will not be tolerated.

Each of the five book forums is worth 15 points, for a combined total of 75 points. If you follow all of the above guidelines regarding the contributions you make to each forum, you will receive full credit.

One more thing: If you would like to make more than 15 contributions to a forum, you can do so, and these additional contributions can serve as **extra credit**. You can earn up to 3 such points per forum, for a possible total of 15 extra credit points across all five forums. These points will be awarded in a comparative manner, such that students with the greatest number of additional contributions will “set the curve” for extra credit scores.

Homeworks. Ten short homework assignments will be due this term, all of which will be made available to you on Blackboard via the Homeworks page. When you open a particular homework assignment, you will be given instructions about how to complete and submit that assignment. Each homework is worth 5 points, for a combined total of 50 points. The due dates of all ten homeworks can be found in our course schedule. **Late homeworks will not be accepted.**

Please note that each homework assignment covers a specific short reading that you can access by clicking the Target Articles tab in the course menu. Along with considering the claims and evidence these articles offer, we will use these articles to examine the communicative functions and persuasive effects of different genres and styles of writing.

Peer-Reviewed Position Paper. Over a period of several weeks this term, you will compose a substantial (1500- to 2000-word) essay arguing for one side or the other of a current controversy in psychology. This writing activity will be divided into three phases:

- 1) Write a draft of your position paper. (The draft will be due on October 7<sup>th</sup>.)

- 2) Write short reviews of three other position paper drafts submitted by your classmates. (Your reviews will be due on October 26<sup>th</sup>.)
- 3) Write a revision of your position paper given the reviews you get back from your classmates. (The revision will be due on November 13<sup>th</sup>.)

This assignment is modeled after the peer review process of many academic publications, and you will be given instruction on how best to offer constructive criticism of other people's writing – and how best to respond to and utilize other people's critical reviews of your own writing. More generally, and throughout the duration of this extended writing activity, we will cover a number of topics relevant to effective writing, including (a) how to locate and evaluate potential sources of information; (b) how to organize your ideas in advance of writing about them; (c) how to recognize logical fallacies in your argumentation; (d) how to compose and format a paper in a professional style (in this case, APA Style); and (e) how to avoid plagiarism in its various guises.

Each of the three writing phases described above (rough draft, peer reviews, final revision) is worth 20 points, for a combined total of 60 points. I will begin offering detailed instructions for the position papers on September 21<sup>st</sup>.

Reflective Book Report. Our last assignment of the semester will be a shorter essay, in which you will be asked to reflect upon our final book – *Self-Portrait in Black and White* – and evaluate the perspective of this memoir in relation to (a) your own lived experiences, (b) your understanding of current trends in our society, and (c) the ideas we've discussed and debated throughout the term. This reflective book report is worth 20 points. Instructions will be given on December 4<sup>th</sup>, and the report will be due on December 11<sup>th</sup>.

### **Additional Thoughts**

Many of the conversations that we will have throughout this course will no doubt provoke strong feelings and challenge your customary ways of thinking about the issues at hand. As you share your thoughts and reactions with others during class, complete our various assignments, and contribute to our book forums, I urge you to repeatedly ask yourself the following questions: How did you come to hold the beliefs that you currently have? What sources of knowledge do you use to support your beliefs? How do you typically respond to evidence or arguments that run contrary to your most cherished beliefs – and how do you typically view people who confront you with such evidence or arguments? What do you do when you recognize contradictions among two or more of your beliefs? And what would it take to make you change a belief that has always struck you as being obviously true? These are all questions that are worth returning to again and again throughout this course ... and throughout life, when you get down to it.

### **Taking this Course as a Supplemental Writing Skills (SWS) Course**

This course is designated SWS. Completion of WRT 150 with a grade of C or better (not C-) is a prerequisite. SWS credit will not be given to a student who completes this course before completing the prerequisite. SWS courses adhere to certain guidelines. Students turn in a total of at least 3000 words of writing. Part of that total may be essay exams, but a substantial amount of it is made up of essays, reports, or research papers. For any significant paper assignments, students will receive assistance with revising their drafts before submitting their final papers for grading. At least four hours of class time will be devoted to writing instruction. At least one-third of the final grade in the course is based on writing assignments. Students must complete this course with a grade of C or better in order to receive SWS credit.

### **Useful Resources**

The Fred Meijer Center for Writing provides writing assistance to all GVSU students, on any type of project and at any stage of the process. The Writing Center employs both undergraduate and graduate writing consultants from across majors and disciplines. Consultants are trained to help writers brainstorm, organize, or develop their ideas, and they can also help writers edit their own work and document sources correctly. The Center's services are free, and students can drop in virtually or schedule an appointment. Email support is also available (and typically provided within 72 hours of submission). For more information about the Writing Center, visit <http://www.gvsu.edu/wc>.

**Students with Disabilities**

If anyone in this class has special needs because of a cognitive, physical, or other disability, please let me know, and contact Disability Support Resources (DSR) at (616) 331-2490. Although students with disabilities are held to the same academic standards as all other students, accommodations will be provided as appropriate.

**GVSU Policies**

This course is subject to all of the GVSU policies regarding enrollment, grading, academic integrity, and fairness listed at <http://www.gvsu.edu/coursepolicies/>.

**Disclaimer**

The schedule of topics and assignments in this syllabus is subject to change. Any such changes will be announced during class.

## COURSE SCHEDULE

### Introduction

- August 31 **Virtual class meeting** from 10:00 to 10:50 a.m.
- September 2 **Virtual class meeting** from 10:00 to 10:50 a.m.  
Complete opening survey by midnight.
- September 4 **Virtual class meeting** from 10:00 to 10:50 a.m.

### The Science of Psychology

- September 9 **Virtual class meeting** from 10:00 to 10:50 a.m.  
Finish reading pages 1-49 of *How to Think Straight About Psychology*.  
Make at least three contributions to the Book Forum by midnight.
- September 11 Homework 1 due by midnight.
- September 14 **Virtual class meeting** from 10:00 to 10:50 a.m.  
Finish reading pages 50-98 of *How to Think Straight About Psychology*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the Book Forum by midnight.
- September 16 Homework 2 due by midnight.
- September 18 **Virtual class meeting** from 10:00 to 10:50 a.m.  
Finish reading pages 99-145 of *How to Think Straight About Psychology*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the Book Forum by midnight.

### The Psychology of Belief

- September 21 **Virtual class meeting** from 10:00 to 10:50 a.m. **(Instructions for the first phase of the position paper assignment will be given during this meeting.)**  
Finish reading pages 1-130 of *Mistakes Were Made (but Not by Me)*.  
Make at least three contributions to the Book Forum by midnight.
- September 23 Homework 3 due by midnight.
- September 25 **Virtual class meeting** from 10:00 to 10:50 a.m.  
Finish reading pages 131-248 of *Mistakes Were Made (but Not by Me)*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the Book Forum by midnight.
- September 28 Homework 4 due by midnight.
- September 30 **Virtual class meeting** from 10:00 to 10:50 a.m.  
Finish reading pages 249-377 of *Mistakes Were Made (but Not by Me)*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the Book Forum by midnight.

### Writing Period (Position Papers)

- October 2 Continue working on position paper draft.
- October 5 Continue working on position paper draft.
- October 7 Submit position paper draft by midnight.

### **Self and Identity**

- October 9      **Virtual class meeting** from 10:00 to 10:50 a.m. **(Instructions for the second phase of the position paper assignment will be given during this meeting.)**  
Finish reading pages 1-72 of *The Ego Trick*.  
Make at least three contributions to the Book Forum by midnight.
- October 12      Homework 5 due by midnight.
- October 14      **Virtual class meeting** from 10:00 to 10:50 a.m.  
Finish reading pages 73-172 of *The Ego Trick*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the Book Forum by midnight.
- October 16      Homework 6 due by midnight.
- October 19      **Virtual class meeting** from 10:00 to 10:50 a.m.  
Finish reading pages 173-234 of *The Ego Trick*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the Book Forum by midnight.

### **Writing Period (Position Papers)**

- October 21      Continue working on peer reviews.
- October 23      Continue working on peer reviews.
- October 26      Submit peer reviews by midnight.

### **The New Culture Wars**

- October 28      **Virtual class meeting** from 10:00 to 10:50 a.m. **(Instructions for the third phase of the position paper assignment will be given during this meeting.)**  
Finish reading pages 1-122 of *The Coddling of the American Mind*.  
Make at least three contributions to the Book Forum by midnight.
- October 30      Homework 7 due by midnight.
- November 2      **Virtual class meeting** from 10:00 to 10:50 a.m.  
Finish reading pages 123-232 of *The Coddling of the American Mind*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the Book Forum by midnight.
- November 4      Homework 8 due by midnight.
- November 6      **Virtual class meeting** from 10:00 to 10:50 a.m.  
Finish reading pages 233-269 of *The Coddling of the American Mind*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the Book Forum by midnight.

### **Writing Period (Position Papers)**

- November 9      Continue working on position paper revision.
- November 11      Continue working on position paper revision.
- November 13      Submit position paper revision by midnight.

### **Sexual Morality**

- November 16 **Virtual class meeting** from 10:00 to 10:50 a.m.  
Finish reading pages 1-66 of *Perv*.  
Make at least three contributions to the Book Forum by midnight.
- November 18 Homework 9 due by midnight.
- November 20 **Virtual class meeting** from 10:00 to 10:50 a.m.  
Finish reading pages 67-166 of *Perv*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the Book Forum by midnight.
- November 30 Homework 10 due by midnight.
- December 2 **Virtual class meeting** from 10:00 to 10:50 a.m.  
Finish reading pages 167-233 of *Perv*.  
Make at least three more contributions to the Book Forum by midnight.

### **Bringing It All Back Home**

- December 4 **Virtual class meeting** from 10:00 to 10:50 a.m. **(Instructions for the reflective book report will be given during this meeting.)**  
Start reading *Self-Portrait in Black and White*.
- December 7 Continue reading, reflecting, and writing about *Self-Portrait in Black and White*.
- December 9 Continue reading, reflecting, and writing about *Self-Portrait in Black and White*.
- December 11 Submit reflective book report by midnight.
- December 16 **Virtual class meeting** from 10:00 to 11:30 a.m.