

Fall 2024 Course Syllabus  
**PSY 311.04: Controversial Issues in Psychology**  
Tuesday & Thursdays 11:30 am - 12:45 pm, ASH 2310  
Department of Psychology

**Instructor:** Walter Sá, Ph.D.  
**Office:** 2210 Au Sable Hall (ASH)  
**Office Phone:** 616-331-3705  
**E-mail:** saw@gvsu.edu  
**Office Hours:** T/TH 2:30 - 3:30 pm (& by appointment)

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** When you wish to send me a message, please directly email me at the above email address. **Please do not use** the messaging feature found on Blackboard Ultra.

### Course Description

This course develops the skills of critical thinking (e.g., analyzing the arguments of other people and forming one's own reasoned position) using controversial issues for instruction content. The course will present a series of critical thinking and communication exercises as ways of exploring controversies found in the field of psychology.

### Course Objectives

While this class will address specific controversial issues, its focus is more on teaching critical thinking at a broader level. The course is also an SWS course. Therefore the objectives are as follows:

- Objective 1:** Identify areas of psychological controversy and evaluate supporting arguments based on empirical findings.
- Objective 2:** Demonstrate critical thinking skills.
- Objective 3:** Research and explain ideas clearly in a written format.
- Objective 4:** Present ideas clearly in oral format.

### Textbook & eReadings

Pinker, Steven (2021). Rationality: What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters. Viking. (Required)

Several mandatory readings will be made available via Blackboard (i.e., eReadings). All assigned readings will be announced in class (and via Blackboard). It is vital that you keep up with assigned readings throughout the duration of the course—you will be **expected to discuss these in class**. **This engagement with the material will be factored into your grade**.

## Course Evaluation

### I. Exams (40%)

Midterm Exam	20 points (20%)
Final Exam	20 points (20%)

### II. Assignments (45%)

Reading & Writing Assignments	20 points (20%)
Review Paper	20 points (20%)
Class Presentation	5 points (5%)

### III. Participation (15%)

Attendance	5 points (5%)
Class Discussion	10 points (10%)

## Course Grade Schedule (& “rounding-up” policy)

A	93-100%	B+	88-89%	C+	78-79%	D+	68-69%
A-	90-92%	B	82-87%	C	72-77%	D	60-67%
		B-	80-81%	C-	70-71%	F	< 60%

For purposes of letter grade submission, numerical scores are rounded up from the **second decimal place value** to the nearest whole number (i.e., xx.45 and greater). For example, 81.45, (a B-) would be rounded up to an 82 (a straight B.) An 81.44, however would remain a B- (the grade threshold does need to be placed somewhere.)

## Exams

The midterm exam will consist of short answer (~2/3 of exam weight) and multiple choice questions (~1/3 of exam weight). The final exam will also consist of short answer (~1/3 exam weight) and multiple choice questions (~2/3 exam weight). Questions will be drawn from both lectures and assigned readings. The **final exam** will be cumulative.

**Emergency closings:** In the event that the university closes on the date of the scheduled midterm exam, the affected exam will be held during our next regularly scheduled class period.

## Reading & Writing Assignments

While assignments will vary a bit in their nature, they typically will require you to read one or more eReadings made available on Bb. Assignments **MUST** be submitted by the indicated due date for full credit (typically the night before a class in which we will discuss that material). A total of 20 points will be made available via these assignments. The weight of each specific assignment will vary. **Late assignments will**

receive an automatic 50% reduction in point-value). Assignments more than 48 hours late will receive a grade of zero.

## Review Paper

Details concerning this portion of your grade will be outlined in class sometime in the near future. Suffice to say for now that you will choose your own “controversial” issue in psychology to write about, perform a literature search on this issue, and ideally incorporate some of the intellectual tools we will cover in this class in your discussion of this issue. The topic you select also needs to be something which has been addressed to some extent with scientific methodology.

## Class presentation

Details concerning this portion of your grade will be outlined later. The topic of your class presentation will be anchored to your chosen review paper topic.

## Participation

Your participation in this course is vital. In addition to just basic physical **attendance**, you **must keep up with the assigned readings and be prepared to contribute thoughtfully to class discussions**. Our class discussions will be highly informed by the assigned readings (in addition to material introduced in class.) The **quality** (not just quantity) of your contributions will be factored into this portion of the score. It is essential that you engage with the reading material in a **reflective** manner and demonstrate this **deep engagement** with that content via your contribution to class discussions.

**Attendance:** Attendance is a minimal expectation and it will reflect upon your grade. One or two unexcused absences will not affect your attendance score. **Each subsequent absence beyond your second, however, will result in a one point deduction** from the 5 points allocated for this portion of your grade. If a student has reached a score of zero on the specific Attendance portion, the one point deduction per absence will then be drawn from the Class Discussion portion of the grade (at the end of the term).

I will not be making any presented slides available for missed classes, please see the below **A helpful suggestion** section.

**Class Discussions:** This class will strongly encourage student contribution to the discussion of both material presented in lecture and assigned readings. Your level of engagement with the material, as evidenced by these contributions to discussions, will be factored into your grade.

## **A helpful suggestion**

Get to know some of your fellow classmates. **Pair up with at least one other student as a "Lecture-Notes-Buddy."** That is, in the event you do miss a class, your Lecture-Notes-Buddy will share their notes and any handouts with you.

## **On being late for classes**

It is a mistake to think that missing the first few minutes of class is harmless. All things being equal, the worst x minutes that you could possibly miss in a lecture is often the **FIRST** x minutes. Those first few minutes of class is when the context for all the remaining lecture material often gets outlined. Your comprehension of lecture material will often be "challenged" when you miss the preceding material.

**If you are late for class, please take the first available seat when you walk in the door so as to minimize distractions to other students.**

## **Our responsibilities**

Both the professor and student have responsibilities in the teaching / learning process.

My responsibilities as an instructor include...

- providing an informative course
- being well organized
- being courteous and helpful with students
- returning graded materials promptly
- being fair and unbiased with grading (e.g., neither discriminating or privileging any student over other students)

Your responsibilities as a student include...

- **attending classes** and being punctual--especially for exams!
- **paying attention**, taking notes, and contributing to class discussions
- seeking help with material if you are having difficulty (e.g., meeting with me)
- doing the assigned readings and studying the course material
- being courteous to your fellow students by **not creating distractions** during class, examples:
  - **silence your phone**
  - refrain from "chatting" during class
  - if you arrive late, take the first available seat, or if you plan on leaving early sit close to the exit door
- **In addition to silencing your phone, please stow your phone away during the class session.**

## **Important note about Laptop Computers in class**

**FYI:** Research indicates that students that write their notes by hand generally do better than those that use laptops. If you really feel the need to use a laptop in class, then

please **ensure that you are utilizing it solely for taking notes** (e.g., don't be watching videos, playing games etc.) This matter is not solely about how these "extracurricular" computer activities will distract you, it also concerns the potential distractions you'll create for those students around you.

## Topics

This class will emphasize **critical thinking**. Critical thinking will be approached in the broad sense that equates it with what is typically thought of as **rational thinking**. Indeed, for purposes of this class the terminology "critical thinking" and "rational thinking" will be interchangeable. As such, this class will emphasize thinking skills related to **scientific inference, logic**, some **quantitative reasoning**, and various sorts of other "**intellectual tools**" and issues relevant to rational thought.

There will be two phases to this course. First, the class will start off with an overview of "rationality" and cover some important intellectual tools in service of rational thinking. While some controversial issues will be embedded for illustrative purposes in this initial overview, the focus will primarily be of the "metacognitive" variety since we will be emphasizing the thinking processes themselves (i.e., thinking about thinking).

After we review some important intellectual tools in service of rational thinking, the class will then move on to a second phase in which we will focus more heavily upon various specific controversial issues in psychology. The below list serves as examples of *some possible* controversial issues to be discussed in this class:\*

- Intelligence (e.g., What is it? Can it really be measured with a test?)
- Just how beneficial is self-esteem (e.g., should schools aim to increase it)?
- Do we truly have free will?
- Sex differences (e.g., Do they exist? Does biology play a role?)
- Can people truly repress traumatic memories?
- How reliable is eye-witness testimony?
- Is addiction really a "brain-disease?"
- Should we motivate students by paying them for academic achievement?
- Does language influence thought? Does the language you speak change the way you think?
- Do brain training programs really work?
- How reliable are our "gut feelings?"
- Do learning styles really exist? Should these be utilized in instruction?
- Is modern technology affecting our cognitive abilities (e.g., is it diminishing attention spans)?
- How important is the theory of evolution to understanding human behavior?

- Does having a religion confer benefits to an individual, or to a society?

Other topics via student course paper topic selection will also be introduced & discussed in class.

NOTE: The exact topics are not fixed in this course and not all of the above will be addressed (other possible topics not listed above may also be included).

### Important dates:

Last day 100% refund	August 30 (5:00 pm)
Last day 75% refund	September 20 (5:00 pm)
<b>Midterm Exam</b>	<b>October 10</b>
Fall Break	No Class on Tue Oct 22
Drop deadline with a grade of "W"	November 8 (5:00 pm)
<b>Review Paper due</b> ( <u>hard-copy</u> in class)	<b>November 12</b>
<b>Final Exam</b> [311- <u>04</u> ]	<b>Tuesday Dec 10 (10 am)</b>

**Important:** Your continuation in this course indicates your acceptance of the above schedule and procedures. The above schedule and procedures, however, are subject to some modification in the event of extenuating circumstances.

## Psych Friends

Psych Friends Peer-to-Peer Mentors: It's never too late to learn about ways to become a more successful student! Psych Friends mentors are upper-level psychology and behavioral neuroscience students who are trained to provide support in many areas, such as: effective studying and time management techniques, exam preparation, understanding the PSY and BNS major requirements, potential jobs and careers in the field, the process of applying for graduate school, and how to maintain physical and mental health as a student.

Visit:

<https://www.gvsu.edu/navigate> to schedule an online or in-person meeting today!